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A
Family Tree.

BY

ALBANY DE FONBLANQUE,

AUTHOR OF

"TANGLED SKEIN," "CUT ADRIFT," ETC.



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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

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AUTHOR OF "TANGLED SKEIN," "CUT
ADRIFT," ETC.



BOSTON:
ESTES & LAURIAT,
301 WASHINGTON STREET,
Opposite Old South.

[1876].

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ESTES & LAURIAT

A FAMILY TREE.

BOOK I.

THE ROOTS OF IT.

CHAPTER I.

HOW MARTHA DENYS WAS TRIED FOR WITCHCRAFT.

THE roots of it go down two hundred and sixty-four years, into what are sometimes called "the good old times." An old Queen, who had reigned like a king—and a bold one—was not long dead; and a middle-aged king, who was no better than an old woman, governed merrie England in her stead. But he was a learned prince, and a cunning. He could talk you Latin by the hour. He would have made an excellent President of a School Board if there had been such things in his time. About the period whereof I write he gave up his mind to put down the smoking of tobacco, and to eradicate the curse of witchcraft from his dominions.

Alas! And were there witches in those "good old times?" The learned king said so. Infallibility at Rome said so. Parliament said so. The Glorious Reformation had nothing to say to the contrary. There were witches in good sooth—dreadful creatures, who sold themselves to the devil, and worshipped him, under the form of a goat, at their unholy sabbaths. They flew about on broomsticks smeared with the fat of unbaptised infants. They afflicted man and beast with diseases, blighted crops, spoiled milk in the churn, and beer in the vat; changed themselves, upon occasions, into rats, and cats, and bats, and toads, and committed other enormities too numerous to detail. One of them, finding the orthodox conveyance inconvenient, (perhaps it was not up to her weight) used to change her daughter into a pony, and

have her shod by the —; well, I don't like to repeat the bad word, so we will say by the *goat*, who appears to have not been a skilled farrier, as the poor girl's hands and feet were maimed. Another old lady, and her daughter aged nine, sold themselves as aforesaid, and raised a fearful storm by pulling off their stockings, and making a lather of soap—proceedings which in these godless days would suggest nothing more reprehensible than a family wash; but they knew better in the "good old times," and hanged the pair for witchcraft. In Germany, from first to last, one hundred thousand criminals expiated their crimes on the scaffold; and in merrie England we disposed of about thirty thousand before we were done with them. Learned judges, grave men who gave body, bone, and brain to the Common Law of England; jurists, whose names are household words in the Temple and Lincoln's Inn; writers, whose text books are quoted now with respect in our highest courts of justice—sat and judged these wretches, and solemnly took note of the stocking-pulling, sud-making, and demoniacal shoeing evidence brought against them. They pretending all the while to be only poor ugly old women, and the *goat* having the meanness never to interfere in their favor.

Perhaps the strangest thing of all was, that many of them confessed their crimes. Writing whilst on circuit as a judge of assize in the year 1682, Lord North relates, "Here have been 3 old women condemned for witchcraft * * * they were the most old, decrepid, despicable, miserable creatures that he (the judge who tried them) ever saw. A painter would have

chosen them out of the whole country for figures of that kind to have drawn by. The evidence against them was very full and fanciful, but their own confessions exceeded it—they appeared not only weary of their lives, but to have a great deal of skill to convict themselves; their description of the sucking devils with sawcer eyes was so natural, that the jury could not choose but believe them.”

The old lady who made the storm out of soap-suds confessed to being a witch, and so did her demoniacal sister who had her daughter so badly shod. She was so idiotic — says the chronicler — that she clapped her withered old hands with glee at the sight of the fire which was to burn her.

This befel in Scotland in the year 1722, more than a century before the time when my story opens. It opens soon after the wise king aforesaid had published his “*Dæmonologie*,” and Parliament had enacted this law: “If any person shall use an invocation or conjuration of any evil or wicked spirit—shall entertain, employ, feed, or reward any evil or cursed spirit—take up any dead body to employ in witchcraft, sorcery, or enchantment, or shall practise, or shall exercise any sort of sorcery, &c., whereby any person shall be killed, wasted, consumed, or lamed,” shall suffer death. The wise king caused a whole assize to be prosecuted because a reputed witch was acquitted!

So you see there must have been witches, and as the race has died out, let us bless the Providence which made our forefathers so wisely severe, so scientific, and so acute.

But do not let us be puffed up with self-conceit. There were wise men in other countries. A horse was tried at Lisbon, in 1601, and found guilty of being possessed by the devil. It was weakly urged that his mundane master had taught him many tricks; perhaps he ran round the ring as that master indicated by motion of whip, picked up pocket-handkerchiefs, fired pistols, wheeled round and round with his front feet on a chair, and performed other accursed and demoniacal evolutions. Tricks, quotha! Was the Holy Office—

was Infallibility to be taken in by *tricks*? They burned that horse to death.

* * * * *

There were so many witches in the year of grace 1610, and honest people were so afraid of them, that clever men, upon whom a portion of the king’s wisdom was shed, arose, and were commissioned to detect them and their ways.

In the northern countries (especially in Lancashire) the curse of witchcraft was felt direfully, and consequently there was no lack of official witch-finders. Perhaps, writing in a better age, I should say that there were many official witch-finders, and consequently, no lack of witches. People must live!

Be this as it may, it is certain that the good town of Manchester was grievously afflicted in divers ways, and the reeve and the rector agreed that witchcraft was at the bottom of the troubles. In the first place the Medlock and the Irwell had risen higher than the oldest inhabitant had known those rivers to rise, and they had flooded some parts of the town. In the country about, sheep and oxen died; and a fever broke out when the waters subsided. Who could have done all this but the witches?

• So said Master Willford, a noted witchfinder. He came to town specially retained, and there was no hiding the truth from him. In less than a week he discovered the culprit, and had her down to the river, opposite where the old church stands, to “try” her.

There were various ways of “trying” witches known in these “good old times.” One was the trial by water. You tied the thumbs of the suspected person together, and flung her into the stream where it was deepest. If she floated, she was a witch; if she did not, she was drowned! There was an end of her, any way. The trial by water was favored by Master Willford, as being the most conclusive. The old woman upon whom his suspicions fell was duly tied, hoven into the water, and floated like cork!

“A witch! a witch!” cried the mob. “Death to the witch!”

And they would have stoned her to

death as she floated; but the witch-finder, calm and proud of his success, bade them drag her to the bank, and spare her for her legal doom.

"She will not drown, my friends," he said, as they hauled her in; "but, in good sooth, she will burn!"

"To the fire with her then! to the fire!" shouted the infuriated crowd. There was not one there who had not suffered in some way by the flood or the fever.

"Softly, softly, my masters," said Willford. It was his first case amongst them, and he wanted to show more of his wisdom. "Softly; let us be sure. There be other tests. Ha! what have we here?"

The supposed witch had struggled so vigorously against her trial, that it had become necessary to tie her legs as well as her thumbs; and in the operation, the upper part of her dress had been torn off her back, and left exposed a pair of withered shoulders, upon one of which the eagle eye of Master Willford detected a mole—a black mole, with three gray hairs in it—as she lay fainting on the bank.

"What think you of *this*?" he cried, in triumph. "Let us praise the Lord, for He has delivered the wicked into our hand. Hark ye, my friends! Wherever the devil kisseth a witch, there springeth a mark like unto this."

"It is a mole," said the nearest bystander.

"Thou art a good man, Master Symes," said the witch-finder, with a sigh, "and knoweth not the iniquity of these creatures. I tell thee it is the devil's mark. Now, look you; when I strike my bodkin into the accursed spot——"

But before he could strike, the mob was divided, and he sent rolling almost into the river, by a tall man in a riding-dress, who led a handsome chestnut horse (from which he had just dismounted) by the bridle.

"What savagery is this?" asked the new comer, sternly.

"A witch! a witch, Master Hugh!" cried a dozen voices.

"'Tis she who brought the flood!"

"She bewitched my good man!"

"She lamed my sheep, curse her!"

"She gave my little Jack the fever!"

"Death to the witch!"

And a storm of other accusations and threats rose from the excited crowd.

"Stand back!" cried the horseman. "So, ho, Hafid!" (this to his horse). "Who proves she is a witch?"

"I do," replied Willford, pale and trembling with anger. "Have a care. I am not without authority."

"Nor I either, sir. I am a justice of peace, as all here know. Again I ask who proves her a witch?"

"She floated. Did not she float, my friends?" replied Willford, appealing to the crowd.

"Aye, aye, 'tis true! She floated, Master Hugh," said the man who had been addressed as Symes, with a grave shake of his bald head.

"And so wouldst thou have done, if thou hadst worn her coats. Why, gossip," expostulated Master Hugh, "what means all this? A reasonable man like thee talking thus! Floated, quotha! Didst thou not mark that her coats, tied at the knee, were full of air, and bulged out like a piper's wind-bag? Floated! I' faith, it would have been more like witchcraft if she had sunk!"

"There be other proofs," cried Willford, eagerly. "Will ye that I put her to the other proofs?" This to the crowd.

"Aye, aye!" they shouted, with a rush and a roar, which was too much for "Hafid's" equanimity. He gave a swirl to the right, and then to the left, describing a semi-circle, of which his master was the centre; and having gotten his hoofs well charged with gravel and small stones, let fly.

The horse that was burned at Lisbon for witchcraft could not have done his master's work more scientifically; but "Hafid" is not bewitched—only high-spirited. He does not like to have strange people fussing round within reach of his heels; and after his first volley, they do not do so. They retire out of range, and mutter—

"Let her be put to other proof."

"Thou wast about to strike thy bodkin into her flesh?" said Master Hugh, addressing the witch-finder.

"Into Satan's mark," he cried; "Satan's own mark, my friends! I appeal to thee, whom she has bewitched. Who is this man, that he should withstand me, when I have the warrant of his worship the reeve?"

"Were he fifty times the reeve he could not warrant the torture of the humblest of his majesty's lieges," said Hugh Desmond, lifting his hat. "Who is this stranger?"

"'Tis no stranger; 'tis Master Willford the witch-finder," replied Symes, in a solemn whisper. "Pry'the, Master Hugh, withstand him not. 'Tis true as he says. He hath the reeve's license. Be silent, lest it be taken ill of thee. The woman is surely a witch."

"If she be, let her suffer; but not without proof," replied the rider aloud. "Ha! thy famous bodkin! If thou dost thrust it into this mark, Master Willford—if that be thy name—and she be verily a witch, what will befall?"

"She will call on the name of her master who made it," said Willford.

"Is there aught strange in thy bodkin? Any charm? May one see it?" asked Master Hugh.

"Charm! Thanks be to God, there is none. The Truth—the sound *Truth*, my friends, is the only charm I know. Take the bodkin in thy hand, and strike thyself."

Master Hugh received the instrument—a large and sharp gold pin—and knelt down close to the assumed witch; but instead of thrusting it into her shoulder, he pretended to slip, and sent it up to the head in the leg of the witch-finder, who incontinently shrieked out—

"THE DEVIL!"

"Why, look you, now," said his tormentor, "how deceitful are these so-called *proofs*! Did we not know Master Willford for an honest man, he would stand confessed a wizard! You heard what he cried?"

"'Twas not struck into a devil's mark," growled the witch-finder, rubbing his bleeding calf.

"A fico for your devil's marks! 'Tis but a mole. Thou hast one on thy cheek, sweetheart," Hugh added, turning to a

pretty woman who stood near. "I would fain be the prince of Darkness for awhile if I might kiss so fair a piece of flesh."

At this sally the crowd laughed—a good sign, for when a crowd laughs it is no longer dangerous.

Master Hugh knew well how to take advantage of the turn of the tide. He treated the witch-finder and his expostulations with ridicule. He rated the men, and laughed at the women; and in a few minutes, the latter, who had been most violent against the witch, vied with each other in restoring the poor wretch to consciousness.

"'Tis true," they said to each other. "Master Hugh is right. There was air in her coats. 'Twas but natural that she should float. Poor old dame! Who is she? Does any one know her?"

No one knew her. She had only lately come to live in the town with her son, who was an armorer. It was rather a good thing for Master Willford that, wise under defeat, he had beaten a retreat before this young giant came upon the scene, with his ten-pound hammer in his hand.

Besides being a most inoffensive person, old Martha Denys, the reputed witch, was a devout Roman Catholic. This did not change the views of Master Willford, who was of the Reformed faith; but the old religion was strong just then in Manchester, and many came forward to vouch for the piety of the accused now that she was safe; so Willford thought it best to retire from the prosecution as gracefully as he could—but he did so with a vow of vengeance against the man who had so misused his bodkin.

Hugh Desmond was not so far in advance of his age as to deny the power of witches. What wrote Mr. Justice Blackstone, whose "Commentaries" are still a legal text-book. "To deny," he says, "the possibility, nay, actual existence of witchcraft and sorcery, is at once flatly to contradict the revealed word of God in various passages, both of the Old and New Testament; and the thing itself is a truth to which every nation in the world has in its turn borne testimony, either by examples seemingly well-attested, or by prohibitory

laws, which at least suppose the possibility of a commerce with evil spirits."

Lord North's letter, already quoted from concludes—

"Sir, I find the country so fully possessed against them" (the three old women left for execution as witches) "that, although some of the virtuosi may think these" (the confessions) "the effect of confederacy, melancholy, or delusion, and that young folks are altogether as quick-sighted as those who are old and infirm, yet we cannot reprieve them without appearing to deny the very being of witches, which, as it is contrary to law, so I think it would be ill for his majesty's service, for it may give the faction occasion to set afoot the old trade of witch-finding, that cost many innocent persons their lives, which the justice will prevent."

Hugh Desmond was not wiser in his generation than were North and Blackstone in theirs. Moreover, in his time, the trade of witch-finding was in full swing. He had an idea that the rains could have caused the flood, and the flood the fever; without the aid of witchcraft in this particular case. But that was no reason why witches should not have been, and be thereafter, the sole cause of disaster in others.

He admitted that malign influences might be invoked, but objected to throwing old women into the river, and pricking them with bodkins as a means of discovering by whom such spells were exercised. He interposed between Master Willford and his victim out of pure humanity and love of justice, and was very glad to find afterwards that old Martha was the mother of the young smith whom he had just taken into his service. But there were those who shook their heads when this fact was brought out.

In his youth Hugh Desmond had been what we call "wild." He ran away to sea, fought the Turks for the Venetian Republic, and did some buccaneering on the Spanish main afterwards on his own account. His hot blood calmed a little, he returned to Europe, wandered about in strange countries, and picked up strange knowledge and occupations, which caused

some scandal to the good folks of Manchester, when at last he came back to take his father's place amongst them.

He was a fourth son when he ran away, and was not much missed; but one by one his brothers died, and the old man was left with no kindred hand to close his eyes, or heir to inherit his well-won wealth. Master Hugh had not been heard of for twenty years, and yet he turned up at the funeral of his last surviving brother, and showed no surprise when told that the others were dead. How was that?

As long as his father lived—it was only for a year—the worst that could be said of Hugh was that nothing would induce him to become a merchant, that he was restless and at times morose, that he swore Spanish and Italian oaths, and rode off alone and stayed away for weeks together on no apparent errand. Still he was not unpopular. He excelled in feats of strength, had a free, rollicking way with women, and a rough-and-ready manner of doing justice and seeing justice done to the poor, which gained him many friends—and some enemies.

How came it that a man who had passed more than half his life abroad should know so much about the rights of Englishmen, that he could beard the reeve himself? This was another mystery.

Within a month of the death of the old merchant, his father, he opened a huge coffer, which had been forwarded after him from Italy, took out many strange, and, to his wondering domestics, unrighteous implements, and set up a forge in an old building once used as a brew-house, where he began to spend his days and nights, forging iron beams, and cranks and springs, and poring over great moth-eaten books. A man of his wealth, who might be reeve, as his father had been, turning blacksmith! The gossips could not understand it, and laid it down at first to the pernicious effects of going abroad. The time came when they took a graver view. This was why master Symes was anxious to prevent him from helping the reputed witch.

He was now about thirty years of age, strong, but well-formed, with clear grey

eyes, and a touch of sadness in them. Short chestnut hair curled naturally round a broad and massive forehead, and a well-trimmed beard of the same rich hue hid the lower portion of his face.

He was a handsome man, this Hugh Desmond, and you could not be half an hour in his company without discovering that he was one with whom it would be dangerous to trifle. Many knew him as kind and generous. Women and children took to him at once. They saw nothing stern in his eye. With the men he was not so popular, as a rule. Truth to tell, he carried too many guns (intellectually) for the majority of his acquaintances. They were rather afraid of him, though amongst themselves they ridiculed his various accomplishments, as jealous people will do.

There was nothing unholy in his cranks and bars, or in the big black books he studied. He had simply become bitten whilst in Florence with that art which was to mechanics, what astrology was to astronomy, and alchemy to chemistry. He was bent upon discovering perpetual motion, and pursued his experiments in the manner and with the ceremonies which the enthusiasts or charlatans, under whom he had studied, exacted.

According to the science of those days, a wheel for the machine which was to move of itself, and never cease moving, was not only to be made of a certain size and weight, but to be commenced at given combinations of heavenly bodies, and many ingredients utterly unknown to Messrs. Whitworth, or Penn, had to be mixed with the metal.

In the intervals of his great work, Master Hugh employed himself upon a much more profitable labor. One of his masters—a pupil of the great Cellini—had given him three keys made by the very hands of that famous man, and each haft was a work of art worthy of its designer. The first was in the shape of an anchor, entwined with sea-weed; the second, of a cross, entwined with ivy; the third, of a heart, entwined with forget-me-nots. HOPE, FAITH, and CHARITY. The first was iron, the second silver, the third gold.

To what caskets they belonged, or if indeed they had belonged to any, was not known. Hugh Desmond determined to make one for them.

A strong hand, a correct eye, and a vivid imagination untrammelled by rule, produced what was at least a curiosity—in parts really beautiful, as a whole quaint and weird. A sort of Mooresque palace, or temple, upon which a crowd of angels, demons, sprites, dwarfs, and creatures half human, half animal, swarmed as bees upon a hive—peering in and out of the windows, climbing over the roof, attacking and defending the doors. There was nothing in common between the casket and its keys, except that its outside was made of the same metals—iron, silver, and gold.

Certain inquisitive neighbors, excited by the rumors that were current, took heart of grace (and a ladder) and watched Master Hugh at his work through a window of the old brewhouse. They saw the great machine growing, day by day, more horribly incomprehensible. They saw it move, and heard it groan. They beheld lumps of clay and metal gradually taking unholy forms, and you may be sure that such scandals lost nothing in the telling. One veracious reporter had seen the Prince of Darkness himself blowing the forge bellows.

When it became known that the worker had taken the son of the reputed witch into his service to assist him in his mysterious labors, and that the reputed witch herself was living in his house, there was great excitement in the good city. It was not reported that the reputed witch passed hours on her knees praying that her benefactor might be delivered from evil—that she went regularly to church and confession, and was religious to fanaticism. It was not considered that Desmond had befriended others besides old Dame Denys, simply because they were friendless or oppressed. Against either—standing alone—there was only a vague suspicion; but although zero, multiplied by zero, gives no value in arithmetic; nothing, multiplied by nothing—according to Scandal's rule—very often makes *something*; and so it

was when Hugh Desmond's unproved sorcery, and Martha Denys' unproved witchcraft, were put together.

CHAPTER II.

THE EFFECT OF HOLY WATER.

MARTHA DENYS did more than pray for the soul of her defender. She determined to save him in spite of himself. He was such a good man, such a kind master, that it was impossible he could be willingly going to destruction. The arch deceiver had him in his toils, and mayhap would soon have his assistant—her son—also. True it was that the young smith's work was not of an occult nature. He forged, and hammered, and cast metals, as an honest man might do; and laughed at the fears and prayers of his pious parent. But he did not sit up at night over those gruesome books, or know for what awful use the instruments he made were intended. No, Hugh Desmond was to have his eyes opened, and the fiend exorcised by a sprinkling of the old brewhouse with holy water.

Remember this was in the "good old times." In holy water Martha Denys put her trust. Had not the saints of old fought and beaten the—the *goat* with it, over and over again? Had not even sinners used it to its discomfiture? She took a flacon to her priest, and, for a consideration, obtained a quart of liquid of more than common holiness — of XXX strength against the powers of darkness — and brought it reverently to her room in Master Hugh's house. But how was she to administer the sacred disinfectant? That was the question! For her life she dared not enter that infernal laboratory. She had looked in once and was terrified. The sight that met her view was evil enough, disguised as it was by infernal artifices. What would it not be when that weird machine and those fearsome instruments resumed their right forms as demons from the nethermost pit under the influence of her holy water? What was she to do? Take her son into the plot? He would only laugh at it. Find

some other instrument? Easily said, but where?—she a stranger and mistrusted! At last she found an accessory in the person of a naughty little boy.

The naughty little boy, who goes where he is not wanted, spies into what is not intended for him to see, and does generally what he is forbid (as they say in America) out of sheer "cussedness," is not peculiar to any country or any age. I dare say there were naughty little boys in Nineveh, who played tip-cat in the streets, and made personal remarks upon the subjects of Sardanapalus, pretty much as they vex the lieges of Queen Victoria with such pastimes and observations in this year of grace.

There were certainly naughty little street boys in Manchester when James the First was king, and in one of these Dame Martha put her trust. Too young to understand what was whispered of Master Hugh Desmond's work, he was all agog to see what was in the old brewhouse, and so steal a march upon his companions. He was to mount on a ladder to a window from which a good sight could be had, and the only service exacted as the price of this treat, was just to scatter some water out of a bottle as far and as widely as he could. This was fair in itself. Naughty little boys like throwing water—at a safe distance—over people.

Dame Martha did not tell him it was holy water, and I'm afraid it would not have much mattered if she had. Up he went like a lamplighter, and was somewhat disappointed, when he reached his coign of vantage, to find that there was no one to sprinkle; but when he saw that grim machine moving by itself, his heart (or one of his legs) failed him. He slipped, and down fell the flacon, still corked, plump into a crucible of molten metal, which Master Hugh, by some forgetfulness, had left uncovered when he went out. It was well for him that he *had* gone out. An awful explosion followed. The crucible was blown to atoms, and its fiery contents scattered far and wide.

Dame Martha fell on her knees, and invoked the entire calendar of saints. All the neighbors rushed out to see what had

happened, and when the cause was elicited from the trembling author of the blow-up, there were found those who had seen the father of mischief himself *in propria personâ*—hoofs, horns, tail and all! flying out amidst the smoke. All this was duly reported to Master Willford.

“Ho, ho,” he mused; “if Martha Denys be not a witch, her master is a wizard. Peradventure they were in league together, and the one grew jealous of the other’s power. The devil can quote Scripture for his purpose—why may not a witch use holy water for her’s?”

Manchester was but a small town then, and the news soon spread. It took this form. A holy priest, scandalised by what he had heard of Master Hugh’s proceedings, went in full canonicals, and preceded by the holy cross, to the old brewhouse, and found the doors locked. At a touch of the sacred emblem they flew open, and discovered the tenant working at his forge, and Satan blowing the bellows! At the sight of the priest, the evil one made a dash to escape, but was met with a douche of holy water, upon which he seized his disciple, rent the building in twain, and carried him away, shrieking, to the nether regions!

The sight of Master Hugh walking about in the flesh somewhat invalidated this narrative in some of its details; but the undoubted fact that Satan had been seen flying away remained. Now it was easy to take a defenceless woman to the river and try her for a witch; but to deal with a man of Desmond’s wealth, and a justice of the peace to boot, was a ticklish business. So good Master Willford told his informant to wait and watch.

That night there were two more explosions, on a smaller scale, caused deliberately. Master Hugh mended his broken furnace, set a crucible in the blast, and when the metal it contained was liquid, suspended over it, by means of a string and pulley, a bottle of water which had not been blessed. Then, having retired to a safe distance, he let go the line. Down fell the bottle, and blow-up number two followed as a matter of course.

Then he sent for several of his late

father’s friends, to explain the phenomenon of the morning; but only one, Master Symes, accepted the invitation.

“Well, old Symes is a staid and respected citizen,” thought Desmond; “his word will be taken, and these ridiculous rumors silenced.”

So, in the presence of that worthy, of the young smith, and of his mother—who with the greatest difficulty was persuaded to come as far as the door, where she stood repeating *paters* and *aves* as fast as her tongue could move, and clasping the largest crucifix she could find—the supposed wizard prepared for explosion number three, which went off to his entire satisfaction.

“Strange!” he mused, as he sat alone afterwards. “Passing strange! Fire and water, both servants of man, each the enemy of the other! Can it be that out of their strife for mastery may come that FORCE I seek?—that power which man is destined to subdue to his will?”

Daybreak found him pursuing the train of thought thus opened; and then he mounted his horse, and rode away on one of his mysterious journeys, still thinking, planning, wondering, groping blindly on the verge of the great discovery which had yet to be made.

Southward he rode, through a country where now the streams run like ink; where earth, and air, and sky are soaked in blackness, and no green thing can thrive; where at night you can no more count the furnaces that blaze than you can count the stars when under the southern cross. He rode over the breezy heath where only the call of the partridge or the cry of the bittern was heard; through shady lanes of the young May blossom; and in the waters that he forded, white lilies flowered, and trout, scared by the plash of his horse’s hoofs, darted like silver arrows from the shallows.

All night he rode, and there were no lights to guide him but those in the clear heaven. In the early morning, he drew rein in front of a grange, such as we may find even now in the midlands—a long, low building, half wood, half stone, whose massive oaken beams and rafters would suffice, split up, to build a modern terrace.

Thatched was the roof, and the windows unglazed (only grand houses had glazed windows in those days), all but one, and in that four globes of glass served for what we should call "panes." This mode of letting in light and keeping out the weather was common enough in Italy at the time; but the few travelers who passed wondered at it, as, indeed, they did at much about those who adopted it.

Hugh Desmond rode up to the porch, and "Carissima" rose to his lips, as he dismounted. He had not time to say the word—he was locked in a woman's arms.

"Ah, Hugo, mio! I knew it was you! I felt you were coming. I have watched for you all night. The saints be praised, you are come at last!" she murmured, in a slight foreign accent, with her arms about his neck and her soft young cheek nestling on his shoulder. "You are come," she repeated, over and over again, as though in those three words were the greatest happiness that heaven could grant her.

"And the little ones?" he asked, raising her face to kiss it again.

"Well—both well. You shall go to them directly, only let me hold you thus a little longer, to be sure—*quite* sure."

And she tightened the fold of her loving arms, and bent upon him the gaze of lustrous, dreamy, dark blue eyes, swimming in soft delight.

"You have me now, sure enough!" he laughed.

"For a long time? Say for a long time."

She held him off a little as she spoke, and a tinge of sadness or anxiety darkened her face.

"For longer than before, sweetheart."

"Is that an English word—sweetheart?" she asked, again nestling on his bosom.

"A good English word. Why not?"

"It sounds not so; it is so gentle."

"You love not our tongue?"

"Oh, yes! for it is yours; but it is rough—all but that word. Call me 'sweetheart' again?"

"Sweetheart—*wife*! That to my ears has the better sound. It holds all the other, and more," said Desmond.

"More—for everyone?" she asked.

"For me."

"It likes me not as well," she said, shaking her head. "Let me be 'sweetheart' always."

He kissed her again, and they passed in.

Why did he hide that fair woman who loved him so in the lonely Grange? Why visit her so seldom that she had to strain him so closely to her heart to be sure that his coming was not a dream? Why did he not take her to his home, and call her before all the world by that name—wife—he held so dear? Was he ashamed of her for her birth? She was of a noble—an all but princely race; Othello-like, he had won her—soldier of fortune, Buccaneer as he was—and like the Moor, had married for beauty and a tender heart. That was the head and front of his offending. A dire, unpardonable offence in the Italy of that time.

There was no regularly organized society—as some have pretended—in existence to watch over the daughters of great houses and save them from Desdemona's fate, or dissolve unequal alliances with three inches of steel. But there was what came to much the same thing—an understanding between fathers and brothers that a plebeian who ventured to mix his blood with theirs should not be permitted to live. It was a point of honor that he should be made away with. Popes, kings, and cardinals, might take the flowers of their flock as mistresses, and the family was flattered rather than otherwise by such favors, and not too proud to profit by such shame; but an unennobled lover pronounced his own death sentence when he swore before God to love and cherish one of these as his wife. Go where he would, they found him sooner or later. Do what he might, they struck him down—not sword in hand like men, but with the poniard of the hired bravo, or the drugs of the secret poisoner. No lapse of time condoned the crime, no distance placed between him and its scene protected the criminal. Vengeance was sometimes slow, but always sure, inexorable as the grave. A Scottish gentleman, who stole a daughter of the visconti, was assas-

minated fifteen years afterwards. Nor was the death of the principal offender the end of such vendettas. Sometimes the wife, and even the children were sacrificed.

Again I say these were your "good old times!" Hugh Desmond had secretly wooed and won a lady in whose veins ran such noble blood, and he learned too late what his love had brought upon her.

One thing was in his favor. He was not known in Mantua. He had arrived in that city but a day when the soft blue eyes took him captive, and the week was not over before he had his bride safe on the sea. Love burns up quickly in Italy, and the whilom Buccaneer was a lusty wooer.

No one knew with whom the lady Maria had eloped save her old nurse, who was the contriver and partner of her flight. It was from this worthy that Master Hugh learned his danger, and it was on her advice that he hid his darling in that lonely Grange, where their faithful attendant died soon after the birth of his first child.

He could be identified only through his wife, and his plan was to keep her in secret till she had mastered the English language, and lost, as far as possible, all traces of her foreign birth. To take her to his home, and present her to his father and his friends, would have been to provoke all manner of questioning and speculation. Besides, in those "good old times" folks looked askance at foreigners, particularly on foreign women.

Old John Desmond often perplexed his son by urging him to marry, and let him (the father) hold a grandchild on his knee before he died. Many and many a time did Master Hugh think of the bright-eyed boy in his Staffordshire Grange, and long to cheer the old man's heart with a sight of his sunny face; but he dared not.

His fears were not for himself. He and death had met so often, that steel and shot had no terrors for him. He was also somewhat of a fatalist, and believed in astrology, as was proper at the time. His horoscope had been cast, and a long life predicted for him.

Maria never knew the reason why she was to forget the soft language of her

girlhood, and not to teach it to her children. It was her husband's will—that was enough for her. Her life in the lonely Grange was wofully dull after gay Mantua, but it was the home her husband had provided, and that was enough for her. The only thing against which her gentle heart rebelled, was his long absences, and even these became more bearable as the children grew up, and could talk with her of him.

So six years passed, and the plan worked well.

"Tell me now, sweetheart," said Hugh, when he had kissed the little ones (a boy and a girl) and appeased their clamorous delight; "tell me what has passed since last I saw thee."

"Oh, nothing—nothing of import."

"Tell me all, and leave me to judge if it be of import or no."

"Well, the great beech tree was blown down by a storm. The Holy Virgin be praised! it fell at night, else had our little ones been hurt, for oft they play beneath its shade."

"They would not have been out in the storm, thou fond one; but on with thy tale."

"There is nothing—stay! Oh, the peacock is dead."

"Peace to his ashes," said Desmond.

"And I have sixteen little chickens."

"A notable housewife, truly! But tell me what has passed outside the house. Hast thou been abroad? Hast thou seen any?"

"Didst thou not say that I was not to go abroad?" she asked, as an answer to his first question. "I have seen none—except——"

"Well?"

"A poor wandering beggar, dear; so faint and lame! A stranger, too; I could but take pity on him."

"A stranger! Do you mean a foreigner?"

"He was of Italy—a countryman, Hugo. Why do you start and look so pale? Surely it were inhuman to let any poor soul pass in such a plight—but a countryman! I gave him food and wine, and he went his way blessing me."

"You spoke Italian with him?"

"A word or two—only a word or two—which flew out unconsidered when he addressed me in my native tongue. Then I remembered your wish. Ah, Hugo! 'twas but a few words, and only to a poor beggar."

"Describe to me this beggar."

"He was fainting with hunger, and his feet——"

"Tell me of his face, his form."

"Tall and dark, and thin-visaged."

"With a scar on his right cheek?"

"In sooth he had! Have you seen him? Did he speak of me?" she asked, with interest.

"I have seen him," Hugh replied, moodily.

"And you are angry," she said, in a reproachful tone; "angry with poor Sweetheart because, when one of her own people cried to her for charity in the name of God, she for a moment forgot your desires, and spoke three little words of her own dear tongue!"

"Not angry," he answered; "only fearsome of a danger you wot not of. In all I do, I but seek thy safety, thy happiness," he continued, drawing her head upon his shoulder, and caressing her soft cheek.

"Only fearsome, wife mine, not angry."

"Then call me sweetheart!"

"Sweetheart!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SEARCH-WARRANT.

IN Master Willford's lodgings, near Deansgate, sat the witch-finder, in earnest conversation with a foreigner—a Spaniard—whose acquaintance he had lately made, and who might have passed as a master mariner. And, indeed, it was in that capacity that he was known to Willford; but a careful observer might have remarked that seafarers did not usually wear such fine linen, or have such delicate, soft hands.

They spoke in English, which the mariner, who was addressed as Vincenti Porras, spoke pretty fluently, and their talk was of the events which were exciting the good town—the awful events which had

passed in the workshop of Hugh Desmond, and his sudden disappearance.

"I knew not," said Porras, "that such lore was practised in your country. We deem the English—pardon me—as too dull and fond of trade to meddle with the occult sciences."

"Alas! my friend," replied Willford, "the devil works alike with all nations; but thou art partly in the right. Such dealings as this man hath with the powers of darkness are not common (thanks be to the Lord!) amongst us. He learned them in foreign parts."

"Ha! He has been abroad! Where?"

"I cannot tell thee with exactitude. He hath sojourned in the Americas, and on the Spanish main; he hath been in the East among the Moslems, who are skilled, I hear, in unholy knowledge. For twenty years he has been a wanderer on the face of the earth, and lastly he came from Italy."

"How know you *that*, Master Willford?"

"Because a huge coffer, full (as it now appears) of unholy utensils and wicked books, was thence despatched after him."

"From what port?"

"From Venice."

"Art sure?"

"The merchant who received it for him from the ship is here now. He will tell thee it is so."

"Nay, I doubt thee not, Master Willford—thou who art so exact! I warrant me there is little in this man's history that thy skill will not unravel."

"'Tis my duty, good senor; 'tis the duty of every God-fearing man to denounce such as he; and this stiff-necked generation will not harken unto me if I give not proofs."

"Has he a wife?" asked Porras, after a pause.

"Nay, nay; wizards marry not, or are given in marriage," said the witch-finder, with a grave shake of his head.

"Pardon me if again I say—art sure?"

"He has a light way with women who favor him, but he seeks neither wife nor paramour. They never do."

"Knowest thou whither he has gone?"

"Not as yet. I shall know. I have

those upon his tracks whom he will hardly baffle."

"Mayhap he will return when he deems this storm has somewhat blown over."

"It will not blow over."

"It *should* not, Master Willford."

"It shall not."

"Has it not seemed to thee," said the mariner, drawing his chair closer, and leaning over the table, "that now he is away would be a good time for making perquisition in his house?"

"I have thought of that," Willford replied; "but the justices will not grant a warrant. He is one of themselves, and for very shame they will not do right."

"But, Master Willford, there be other folk living in that house. There is the woman who was tried as a witch."

"The people deem her innocent; they lay all the blame upon her master now," said Willford, with a gleam of triumph in his eye.

"If the law deny them justice, the people should take it for themselves," said the Spaniard.

"This is England, señor; the law is respected."

"Even when corrupt?"

"Aye, even when corrupt in one limb; the body of it is pure."

"Listen, my friend. For a great good, one may do a little evil."

"The doctrine of the Society of Jesus!—a detestable, damnable heresy!" cried Willford.

"Patience, patience! The evil whereof I speak is not one which affects the soul. 'Tis naught but what, at its worst, would be a slight, momentary injustice to one—easily repaired—which would do a great justice to all."

"Speak what is in thy mind."

"What if this woman's son were accused of a theft? He is but a smith. He has no friends in power. A warrant might be got to search *his* lodgings, and the search be easily followed to where he works. Give him a rose-noble and declare that he has been wrongfully accused, and what harm comes to him? But in the while this Hugh Desmond's books and papers may pass into your hands; and who

knows what else to criminate him might be found? Think it over, Master Willford, think it over. The law, or those who administer it, stands between thee and justice—between thee and thy Christian *duty*, my friend. Did not Joseph accuse his best-loved brother of theft, the better to work out God's will?"

"It were difficult," murmured Willford, "and if it should fail——"

"Leave it to me, and it will not fail," said the other, quickly.

"Thou takest a strange interest in the matter, señor."

"I take a deep interest in thee, Martin Willford. Thou art a good man, and it ricks me to see thee baffled in thy good work."

It is unnecessary to record what more passed between these worthies. That night there was an outcry in an ale-house much frequented by smiths; a tall, gaunt man, with a scar on his face—a foreigner—had been robbed. He had got very drunk on the unaccustomed liquor. A young smith had made great fun with him: rolled him on the floor, blackened his face, and performed upon him other horse play; but when he came to his senses in the morning, his purse was gone, and he loudly accused that young smith of having stolen it. The foreigner's master (also a foreigner) took the case up warmly. His servant was an honest man, though he did take too much ale; he was incapable of making a false accusation. As the young smith had left the drinking shop before the man recovered, he had an opportunity of hiding that purse. Let it be searched for. Nay, the smith's own character demanded such an inquest, for if the purse were *not* found he would be cleared. So the justices granted their search-warrant, little thinking to what extended use it would be put.

The constable to whom this warrant was entrusted for execution was an official of the Dogberry type—a big, fat man, with a high opinion of his own importance and power, and a grudge against Master Hugh, who had snubbed him from the bench more than once for the manner in which that power had been exercised. He

did not love Master Hugh, and readily fell in with the views of Señor Porras as to how the search-warrant should be used. He thought that Señor Porras (though a foreigner) was a very superior man, and the Señor declared loudly that he would to Heaven they had in his country such zealous and intelligent officers as the constable.

"There is small need," said the wily one, "to point out to one of thy experience that if this young man be a thief he will not hide his spoil in his own chamber. No, no: the more so, when there is that laboratory of his master which none may enter for (as he may think) a safe place of deposit. It is *there*, as you so justly said just now, that our search should be made, Master Constable."

Master Constable had not said one word about searching the laboratory, but he pursed up his lips and nodded his head with Burleighian wisdom all the same.

The chamber of the accused Gregory Denys was searched as a matter of form, as also was that of his mother, and nothing was found. The searchers then proceeded to the old brew-house, accompanied by the young smith—as usual, hammer in hand. He had treated the accusation as an honest man should, with a mixture of indignation and ridicule. They might turn his quarters topsy-turvy, if they pleased, all the better for him, but when they began to meddle with his master's belongings, he growled and followed them here and there like a faithful watch-dog, gripping his hammer now and again, pretty much as his canine type might show his teeth.

"What is this?" said Señor Porras, halting in front of the casket of the three keys, already described; "a strange piece of handicraft, truly."

"But not for thee to tamper with," said Gregory, bringing down his hammer with a thud on the block on which it stood. "That is my master's. He alone has the keys, and he left the town before you, rascal, accused me."

"Well, well, let it rest, Master Constable," Porras replied. "It is not in such things, as well thou knowest, that stolen

goods are bestowed. Hast searched, as Master Constable bade thee, in the ashes of the forge and the lumber on yon shelves?" he continued, to the lesser powers of the law.

Now Master Constable, though a big man, had a small supply of valor, and the weird contents of the laboratory, especially the great machine, scared him not a little. He kept close to the Señor, and echoed his words in a feeble voice. "Aye, search as I bade thee, my masters; search well as I bade thee, in the ashes and amongst the lumber," he repeated. So they raked about the furnace, and turned out crucibles, and caused consternation to rats and mice and beetles, and raised a great dust, but found not what they sought. As they searched and no harm came, Master Constable took heart, and assisted them with an "Ah, this is a likely spot," or an "It misgave me that we should not find it here," according to circumstances.

They did not notice what Señor Porras was about the while; but he was busy—very busy. A cry of horror from the valiant constable disturbed him.

In a far corner, where alembics, retorts and other instruments of alchemy were stored, they had come upon a pile of bones!

"The Lord preserve us! There has been murder done!" cried the constable. "See, good Master Porras, these be dead men's bones! Oh! alack, alack!"

Porras took up one of the bones, and a smile glimmered for an instant on his gaunt visage as he examined it. He threw it down again, and drew the constable aside.

"Thou hast indeed made a fearful discovery," said the former; "one that might well affright a man of lesser parts. But thou knowest thy duty; thou knowest the law. Thou art here for one purpose; stick to that, Master Constable, and meddle not with what might cause thee trouble. Lay it upon thy knaves that they say nothing touching those relics, and do thou keep thy own counsel till thou canst act safely, mark me—safely."

"'Tis just what I was about to say to

thyself, good señor," said the constable. "Not a word, I pray thee, about the bones. Good Lord! What a coil! what a coil!"

After this, the search went on with relaxed vigor. Master Constable was no longer the foremost, poking and prying here and there. His men were ready enough to tell each other to move this, or shake out that, but hung back from touching anything themselves. None could tell what farther horror might be disclosed, and all were relieved when Señor Porras, who had again been at work in his own way, came forward and said, "Good Master Constable, if *thou* hast not found the purse in this space, be sure it is not here."

"I did so conclude a while ago," said the constable, "but for thy sake, to content thee the more, I did continue. Art satisfied?"

"Aye, fully." There was an evil gleam in his eyes as he spoke.

"Thou hearest," said the constable to his men. "He is fully satisfied. Thou wilt tell the justices, Señor Porras, that I have made full perquisition; and that thou art satisfied."

"Aye, that I will."

Then did the law's executive impress upon his followers the necessity of keeping the discovery of those bones a dead secret, as they valued his favor.

"For," said he, "peradventure there may come somewhat out of this, and peradventure there may not. If haply there hath been a crime committed, it is not like grave and valiant officers to talk of it like idle gossips; and if not, then mayhap thine ears may smart if thy tongue wags loosely."

As they left the house, they found a large crowd assembled in the street. The news that the premises of Hugh Desmond were being searched, had leaked out and spread. Long before the searchers appeared the result of their search was known. They had found the dead body of the wizard (for it was Satan himself who had appeared in his likeness the next day in the streets) on the roof where the evil one had dropped him. When they touched his magic books they had burst

into flames in their hands, and so on. The real cause, or excuse for the search, was unknown, or forgotten, amidst these exciting reports.

Foremost in the press stood the man who had lost his purse, and upon him Señor Porras turned in anger.

"Why, thou drunken loon!" he shouted, "thou hast wronged an innocent man! Stand back, good people, press not so upon us, I pray you. There is nothing to tell—nothing," he said, as the crowd began to clamor for news. "We have searched the chamber of this good smith, and found nothing that an honest man may not have. We have searched diligently the place where he works, and Master Constable here will tell you that we have not found anything that an hon—beshrew me! I am going too far. I was about to say as before—nothing that an honest man may not have, but that would not be truth. Let me say instead, nothing of *his*—of Gregory Denys', mark you—that was not lawful. We did truly find—but that is naught at present. Oh, my masters, you are well served. Nothing escapes Master Constable. He is a man who knows his duty, and does it without regard of persons. But thou"—turning again upon his retainer—"thou soft-brained guzzler! Thou hast brought thyself into a pretty coil. Accuse this honest smith of robbing thee! Does he look like a cut-purse?—thou fool! Robbed thee of thy money, and thou drunk! How knowest thee that thou hadst any money upon thee? Come, come! fair is fair. We have searched the lodgings of the accused; let us now see what may be found in the chamber of the accuser; and I tell thee plainly, Marco, before these good men, that if thy purse—a plague on't!—be there, thou shalt forfeit it to the man thou hast wrongfully charged with its loss. Is that fair?"

"'Tis just!—'Tis right!—A worthy gentleman, and a well spoken!" broke from the crowd, and away they scampered to Dean's Gate to see the fun, and they were rewarded.

In less than ten minutes the crest-fallen Marco was shown his purse, taken from the pocket of one of his own doublets,

which he had put off the very day he had taken too much of that strong ale! Señor Porras was furious. "Thou'rt forsworn! Thou art disgraced! And thou hast disgraced me—thy master. Wretch! On thy knees and crave this good man's pardon. I prythee be not hard with him," he said in an undertone to Gregory; "he is but a foolish lad, and honest in the main. 'Twas the liquor that betrayed him. Take his money—justly thine—as compensation, and pardon him. Thou wast innocent. Had I seen thy face before this matter went so far, I would not have believed a word against thee—no one would."

But Gregory was made of too stern stuff for such soft-solder to penetrate.

"To the devil with thy purse and thee!" he growled, as he flung the one out of the window, and turned on his heel from the other. The purse fell upon the stones below and burst. The crowd scrambled for the scattered coins, and there was an end of events for that day, so far as this history is concerned.

But not an end to talk over what had happened, of questions, and surmises, and scandal. What was it that Master Constable had found in the old brewhouse? Nothing unlawful belonging to Gregory Denys, for the señor (who had become very popular by grace of that scramble) had said so; but there was something unlawful there. Some mystery. Was it true about the dead body and the blazing books? No one had denied it.

Cross-examined by his wife—who was a lady of a curious mind, and not to be denied information—Master Constable confessed—under a solemn pledge of secrecy—about those bones. The awful secret burned in the breast of Mistress Constable as a half-crown burns in the pocket of a school-boy, and she yearned to spend it. What is the use of knowing more than your neighbors if you may not tell it? Under a pledge of solemn secrecy, she told her particular friend, who passed it on under similar conditions, until all Manchester was raving about the bones. They were bones of infants, which the wizard had boiled down to get their fat.

They were the bones of old John Maitland, who had disappeared! They were the wizard's own bones! They were the bones of his father, which he had sacrilegiously rifled from the grave to aid in his unholy rites! Alas for popularity! All the good deeds that Hugh Desmond had done, all his kind words, all his gallant defending of the poor, were forgotten. To the winds went good Master Symes' explanation of the holy water affair! He had been deceived. The old version was revived, and this followed so quickly by that gruesome discovery, suggesting worse than murders—damned Hugh Desmond. Living or dead he was a wizard. Dead he was to be held accursed—living he was to be cursed, and die.

Master Willford had taken no part in the search, but its result—so far as it has been recorded here—was duly reported to him by Señor Porras.

"Let it work, my friend," said the latter, when he had told his tale. "It will all come out—the more so I advised them to keep it secret."

That same night Señor Porras and his man Marco rode out of Manchester. Rode, when they cleared the town, not as master and man. They travelled as equals and companions side by side, and their talk was not in Spanish, but Italian. They rode on the very tracks which Hugh Desmond had left on moor and fell, five days before—Marco leading, for he had been that way already.

CHAPTER IV.

NOBLESSE OBLIGE.

THE noble house of Ribolini was not fortunate with its rising generation when the sixteenth century was in its first decade. The only daughter had died, in the prime of her youth and beauty, of a malady so sudden and virulent, that her friends were shocked by the appearance of her funeral cortege before they knew of her illness.

She was lost almost on the eve of her marriage, and there were some who shook

their heads and said that perhaps she was happier as it was; for the union, arranged by her family, did not promise well for her. The bridegroom elect—a distant cousin—was old enough to be her father; a stern, cold man, with a face cut, as it seemed, out of grey stone, and a heart to match; but rich, and a near relative of the Gonzagas, who ruled Mantua in that day. But young ladies had to do what they were told in those good old times.

The only son was what we should call “fast.” I do not know what name they had then for young nobles who found their pleasures outside of the parental palace, and sowed wild oats in the St. John’s Woods (be sure there were such glades) of the Italian cities. He had a roving, wild, unsatisfactory disposition, this Cosmo de Ribolini, and, as a matter of course, was his mother’s darling.

It had pleased him to spend much of his time away from paternal control in Venice, and formed ideas in that freer atmosphere which were shocking to the head of his house. He had, moreover, evinced indifference about the traditions of his family, and could not be got to study the duties to be expected of him when he should become its chief. The fact was, that these traditions and duties had *been sprung* upon him at an age when he could not understand what was meant; and when his mind was matured sufficiently to comprehend them, it sickened against the so oft-repeated dose.

His father had married late in life, and his mother died shortly after the loss of her daughter. He had no companion but his sister; and when she was taken away, the last tie which bound him to the dull old Mantua palace was severed. He visited the principal seats of learning in Italy, sojourned in Rome and Venice, and learned a great many things of which his grim old father, who had never travelled a hundred miles in his life, knew nothing, and disliked by intuition. It was well, for some reasons, that this pair were kept a good deal apart. The son was in advance of his time, the father behind it. He considered “the house” as a kingdom, and its

head as a king with absolute power, even of life and death, over its members.

It was out of this idea that the social law, mentioned in a former chapter, arose, and was justified. The great houses considered themselves above the law. They resented interference from without; but were by no means slow to stretch their own authority when an opportunity presented. Half the feuds and vendettas of the day arose out of some one having punished some one else’s servant, or taken the part of some one else’s client. It was only when the class or its privileges were attacked that they stood together, and bearded pope, emperor, or king in defence of their cherished feudal rights.

One of these was to regulate their own households. An unauthorized suitor came a-wooing with his life in his hand. His own kin would fight for him as long as he lived; but when he took the inevitable consequences of his rashness, his fall was, as a rule, unresented. If the County Paris had caught Romeo in Juliet’s balcony, and had disposed of him, I do not think there would have been any further slaughter of Capulets or Montagus on that score. Something like a verdict of “served him right” would probably have been recorded. Those old enemies would have hated each other a little more, and have become somewhat quicker (if possible) to pick a quarrel; but it would not have suited either of them to deny the abstract right of any gentleman to slay, at sight, the gallant who might rob him of his promised bride. Nor would justice have interfered. Do you suppose that Romeo was banished because he killed Tybalt? The duke was bothered by these constant street brawls, and wanted peace; that was all.

No noble in all Italy was more fully convinced of the wisdom and the justice of this principle than the old Count de Ribolini. Several times had he broached the subject to his son, as an abstract proposition, but without producing any interest in his hearer. The time came when he had to put it in a more practical form.

“Your conduct, my son,” he said one

day, soon after Cosmo's return from a long sojourn in the queen city of the Adriatic, "angers and grieves me. If heaven had so willed it, I should have depended upon another to uphold the honors and dignity of our house, and have allowed thee to sink into the companion of traders, and the friend of the foes to law and order, that it seems thy will to be. But my hopes have been disappointed. I have only thee; and there is a matter of grave import, the further concealment of which would be a sin against my order. Thou must know it, and act as becomes a Ribolini. Cosmo, my son, prepare thyself for a startling revelation. In the tomb of our race, under the inscription to the memory of thy sister Maria, there was no body laid!"

"Maria not dead!" gasped the young man.

"Dead to thee, dead to me—a thousand times dead to our house," replied his father, sternly. "Were she burned with fire, and her ashes scattered to the four winds of heaven, she would be less dead to us than she is. But yet she lives—DISGRACED!"

"Oh, my sister!"

"Thou hast no sister. She who was once my daughter was affianced, as thou knowest, to Vincenti de la Torre; but two days before the time fixed for her marriage, she fled, accompanied by her nurse—and another."

"His name, father?"

"Patience. To hide our disgrace, we gave out that she had died suddenly, and a coffin, supposed to contain her remains, was carried in pomp to the grave. Ah, me! It was said that grief had burned up my tears. I was crushed to the earth—but by humiliation, Cosmo, not by sorrow."

"Art sure—art certain there is cause? Oh, father! she may not be dishonored. Bethink thee. Maidens have been carried off against their will; have been murdered, when they strayed abroad, for their jewels; have been drowned by accident, and never heard of again."

"Have I not told thee she lives? She fled of her own free will, as part of a let-

ter found in her chamber proves. She fled with her lover."

"I was a man, and you told me not!" said Cosmo, through his clenched teeth.

"Thou wert a rash, hot-headed boy. I will not so far wrong thee as to suppose thou wouldst have intentionally betrayed our secret, but thine acts would have given it to all Mantua before a week had passed. The greatest caution was required—first, to cover our disgrace, and next to find the path for our revenge."

"Who knew of this?"

"Thy mother and de la Torre—none other."

"And none suspect that false burial?"

"None."

"'Tis well. Now tell me how we have been avenged?"

"We are not yet avenged."

"What! After six years?"

"There was no clue to the man. One after another, the suspicions we formed proved groundless; but our efforts have not ceased—no, not for a day!—and now," said the old man, more sternly than ever, laying his hand upon a folded paper, "they are rewarded."

"Without my aid!" muttered his son with bitter reproach.

"The quarry is marked only—not struck yet. Read."

And he read as follows:—

"*Most Illustrious Sir and Dear Cousin:*

"This leaves me suffering much in body from privation and sickness on the seas, but hopeful in mind. In my letter from Venice, which I hope was duly placed in thy honorable hands, which I kiss, I informed thee of the reasons which led me to seek in England the sequel of the discovery I had made in Florence. Thou didst think, I fear me, that the clue was too faint to warrant so long and dangerous a journey; and, in good sooth, it so appeared. But what wouldst thou? For six years we have been laboring in vain, and what seemed, from time to time, strong confirmation of our suspicions, has melted away as we approached it. Might not (for so I reasoned) what is but a little fact lead up to mighty things? And,

thanks to holy St. Joseph, to whom I have never ceased to pray, so it hath come to pass.

"Most illustrious, our good kinsman Marco, who, for the purposes of our plan, deigns to pass in public as my servant, has seen her, has spoken with her, and was not recognized; for, as thou knowest, they have not met since she was a child. He was disguised as a beggar, and addressed her in her native tongue. At first she answered him in Italian, but took fright for some unknown cause, and pretended not to comprehend his words. She is living in a lonely farm-house in the province they call Staffordshire, where he—the man we seek—visits her from time to time. Having thus found the hen bird in her nest, it is easy to track her mate. By the time that this shall reach thee, I shall know him."

"Let me now, if it please thee, return to what passed at Venice. An Englishman whose name I could not ascertain, set sail from that city, soon after the accursed day; with one who passed as his wife, and an old woman whose description proves her to be the traitress Bertha. The ship was bound for Chester, in England; but she was lost on her next voyage, her patron is dead, and there is no one living in the aforesaid city who can, or will, help me to trace the man. I am searching in neighboring towns, and this is wrote in Manchester. Thou wilt ask, why not wait for him where she is? I will answer thee. There is no town within a league; and for us, foreigners as we are, to lurk about the spot would surely arouse suspicion, and mayhap afright our quarry; whereas, by hunting in a circle, we shall surely come upon his traces, and at last discover him in the place he cometh from. They are undoubtedly married, and have two children—a boy and a girl.

"In my love and respect for thee, Most Illustrious, I am as much thy son, as though the honor thou destined for me were truly mine; but our kinship is remote, and this matter is too grave for me to act therein at my own will. Touching the man my course is plain. He dies, but for the rest I wait thy orders. It is

time that thy son should act in this. Send him to me with speed, I beseech thee, or write, and address thy missive to me, as Señor Porras of the Netherlands, at the 'Golden Boar,' in Deansgate, of the town of Manchester, England, by a trusty messenger, as beseems the importance thereof.

"Thy loving kinsman, and faithful servant,

"VINCENTI."

In these bad young times, a brother whose sister had eloped would read with a deep sigh of relief such words as "they are undoubtedly married," but the brows of Cosmo Ribolini darkened more over that passage than any other. Was it because a nameless adventurer had stolen a daughter of his house, and dared to wed her? His father, who was watching him intently as he read, thought so. He finished the letter to its signature, and reperused it, before he laid it down. Both father and son remained silent for a while—each apparently loth to be the first to speak. At last the younger blood gave way.

"When came this to hand?" asked Cosmo.

"Yester morn, and it behoves me to act upon it without tarrying. Can'st not thou divine what I would do?"

"I am bewildered, surprised. I——"

"'Tis just that thou should'st be so," interposed his father. "I blame thee not for thy inability to answer me. All this cometh on thee of a sudden, and thou hast not had time to weigh well its portent—I would give thee till to-morrow to think it over; but time presses. I must reply to the Count Vincenti this night, and thou must be the bearer of my letter."

"I?"

"None other. It is the duty of our order, my son, to act as its judges in such matters as this, and to be the executioners of its decrees. What did the De Este when the Visconti Spanello wooed their daughter against their will?"

"He was stabbed in her balcony, and she compelled to wash up his blood, like a menial."

"True. And when the young Benedetti—half-witted as he was—pretended to

have married a minnie-singer, hast heard what was done upon them, and their scum?"

Cosmo turned pale, and trembled. His father, taking his silence as a negative, proceeded.

"They were strangled in their bed, and the child in its cradle."

"The child too?"

"Was a base jonglours brat to live and sit with *us*?" cried the old man fiercely. "And the Visconte—what did they? They were foiled as we have been for years, but their righteous vengeance—nay, 'tis *justice* my son—their *justice* was executed at last, as our's must be; but not by the Count Vincenti," he added, with marked emphasis on that name.

"Oh Father! do you mean that I——"

"Patience. Vincenti is a good man; a loyal, an honorable, and a true, else had I not chosen him as a son. He says justly here (touching the letter) that the matter is too grave for him to manage at his will. But he is wrong in supposing that it is for him to deal with that villian who stole my—who stole her who was once my child. That is my right and my duty; and as my age and advancing infirmity forbid me to cross the seas to execute them myself, I make thee—my heir, the future head of my house, my delegate. Slain by the hand of Vincenti, this wretch would die murdered. There are those who have hired daggers for their work, but I will not. I depend on thee, my son, for justice."

"You must grant me time—time to think, to realise this horror," said Cosmo starting from his seat, and pacing the room, "my brain is in a whirl. It is like a nightmare; I *cannot* realise it. My sister that was dead—my loved sister for whom I mourned so! And she is alive, married in a strange land; has little children, and perchance is happy! Oh, my father, are those little children doomed?"

"The boy is doomed," replied Ribolini severely. "Could'st thou be guilty of such weakness to-morrow, I would disown thee, but I can allow somewhat for thy surprise and confusion to-day. Thou shalt have time to clear thy brain, and chase these unworthy repinings. Happy,

sayeth thou? For shame, for shame! What if she be happy in her degradation? The worse for her to be so. It will occupy me full two hours to answer my fair cousin. That will be time enough for thee. Thou can'st leave me now, and prepare to start at sunrise."

He left his father's presence with those last words ringing in his ears and deadening his mind. To start at sunrise! and it was long past mid-day already. Short space for a man to prepare himself to become the executioner of his sister's husband and child. He had not replied to his parent's aspersions upon his conduct and his associates. Sons did not reply in those days; but as the words came back to his memory he felt that they were unjust. He the companion of traders, and friend of the foes to law and order! Why, there was not in all the world a prouder aristocracy than that inscribed in the "Golden Book" of Venice.

Strange it is, but true, that in great bodily perils, or in great mental conflicts, some small matter will creep in and occupy the thoughts. A drowning man will suddenly remember a trifle of his boyhood, and dwell upon it. We have now before us one who, amidst the astonishing revelations just made to him, could do little but fret over the implied assertion that he was unworthy of his order; and it was this grievance, founded on truth, which, though he did not trace its workings, hardened his heart later on to the duty he was commanded to perform. Let the function be as hard or as disagreeable as you will, once dignify it as one's *right*, and no man cares to see it usurped, or to be superseded in its exercise.

Cosmo Ribolini began to hate the Count Vincenti for what he might have been, and for what he had done. Had not his father told him in almost as many words, that if the count had married his sister he would have become the head of the house? And this because he (Cosmo) preferred gay, bright, beautiful Venice, the home of art and science, to dull old Mantua. He—the only son, the heir—grown man as he was, had been treated like a child; family secrets kept back from him, and another,

all but a stranger, set to vindicate the family honor in his place. He was bitterly jealous of the Count Vincenti, and he found a grim satisfaction in the thought that he was going to balk him of the vengeance of which he wrote so confidently.

By the time he reached Venice he had ceased to grieve about his sister. "The man" was to die, and her sorrow would be the same, no matter by whose hand he fell. She need not know who killed him. About the child, he had formed a plan in accordance with the letter of his father's orders. The child had done no harm, and might live, but not as a Ribolini. In this also he would thwart the hated Vincenti.

When Ribolini told his son what had befallen the plebeian wife and child of the heir of the Benedette, by way of preparation for the duty he had to perform towards the adventurer who had stolen his sister, and their male offspring, I have said that he grew pale, and trembled. He had repeated unmoved the fate of that unwelcome lover. He knew well enough that a man who went a-wooing amongst his superiors, carried his life in his hand; but this was the first time he had heard of the patricians' "justice" overtaking a woman who had married above her sphere. Such instances were so rare as to be almost unknown. If a peasant maiden found favor in the eyes of a noble, he adopted the simple Sabine plan. There was no talk of priest or ring.

The young Benedette was an imbecile, and the woman who entrapped him a pariah; what could it matter to Cosmo that her neck was wrung? Well, it caused him a rude awakening from an idea as old as "society" itself, that things which disgraced a woman are permissible to a man. He considered that his sister had disgraced herself and her race by wedding one that did not belong to her world. Had he been a Bayard, or a Crichton, and not noble, it would have been the same; but he remembered certain vows he had breathed in the ear of one not of his world—no minnie-singer girl was she—and a cold tremor ran through him to the very marrow of his bones.

Oft had he reasoned with himself, "She

has beauty and wit enough to grace a throne. She is good and pure as the angels in heaven. What if her lineage be not noble—I do not sink to her level—I raise her to mine."

As his father spoke, he asked himself would her beauty and goodness weigh in the balance against her ignoble blood. The minnie-singer was strangled, not for being a wanton, but because she was a wife. The marriage was the crime. This made him tremble.

It was but a passing qualm. *His* case was so different (our own cases always are.) He was noble, and could do as he pleased. In a few years, perhaps months, he would be master of his own destiny, and who would judge him then? Before he set sail from Venice he renewed his love-pledge to the daughter of a merchant, and departed to kill a merchant's son for having espoused his sister.

In the days of my youth, when I read novels *sub rosa*—or, to speak more accurately, under a certain umbrageous yew tree—readers were fond of making marginal notes of admiration and otherwise. The volumes I get from my circulating library now, bear few of such criticisms. We read faster, I suppose, and care less for what we read. Nevertheless, I fancy I hear exclamations of "ridiculous," "impossible," in connection with the last paragraph. What! take a human creature's life for doing what you deliberately propose to do yourself? Absurd! Unjust, if you please, but not unnatural. You think it good fun, my dear young friend, to dance with the lady's maid at the servants' ball; but you don't like to see your cousin Mary waltzing with the footman. Analyze the reason, and you will understand Cosmo Ribolini.

CHAPTER V.

AMOR VINCIT OMNIA.

ARRIVED in Venice, Cosmo Ribolini went straight to the house—I might say palace—of one of its merchant princes, Bartolomeo Bosco, by whom he was heartily received.

"The saints be praised!" he cried, as he ran down the steps leading to the canal. "It is indeed thy honorable self! I could scarce believe it. Give me thy hand, most illustrious. Thou art come to us again—so soon."

"So soon!" laughed the young noble, stepping from his gondola; "have I worn out my welcome?"

"Nay, it is as good as new; but didst thou not say when we parted last that my lord, thy father, opposed thy sojourn here?"

"In sooth he did, but it is at his bidding that I am come."

"Blessed be the reason, whatsoe'er it be. Get thee in, get thee in, and leave me to deal with thy baggage. Ho la! Pietro, Carlo! Lazy rascals! dost thou not hear me call?"

Nothing loth, Cosmo entered the house, and made for a certain balcony where a white robe fluttered.

The wearer had seen the arrival of a gondola, but was too deeply plunged in thought to heed it. They were not happy thoughts, if we might judge by the sad expression which filled her large black eyes. An open book lay unnoticed in her lap, and one soft little hand was pressed upon the bosom of her dress, pressing a golden locket to her heart. Like "a daughter of the gods, divinely tall and most divinely fair," was she. Of a state-ly, almost regal beauty, which in repose seemed cold and passionless, and required a touch of sadness, or of another emotion soon to flash upon her, to make it lovable.

A light step in the corridor behind her, two hands on her eyes, a cry, two names, and—dear ladies; as it is in the days of Queen Victoria, so it was in the reign of James I., when true lovers met.

The beautiful face was not sad now.

"Ah, Cosmo! no more."

"One."

As he drew her towards him, she started and turned pale.

"Thy father?"

"Lives, caressima! and is well—for him. Didst fancy I had come to claim thee? Ah, no, not yet. Patience, my soul. God forbid that I should wish the old man ill,

though he loves me not. Patience for a little longer."

"For a lifetime if needs be, caro mio," she replied. "It was but a thought which flashed across my mind. I had not hoped to see thee again till—till then. Thou hast not angered, hast no disobeyed him?" she asked quickly.

"Nay. On the contrary, he is better pleased with me now than he has been for many years."

"He knows that thou art here?"

"He knows that I shall pass here on my travels."

"Thy travels?"

"Yes, beloved; I am but a bird of passage. I take the first ship for England."

She crept closer to him, and he felt her shudder in his arms.

"Why, thou faint heart!" he said cheerfully. "Thou a merchant's daughter, and dost fear the sea?"

"I know its perils," she replied. "Oh, Cosmo, must thou go?"

"Indeed, indeed, I must; but have no fear, sweet; at this season there are no storms."

"Storms are not the only perils of the cruel sea."

"But they are the gravest."

"Not so. The fury of the tempest is nothing in comparison to the cruelty of man. Hast never heard," she added, in low, frightened tones, "how my dear father was captured by pirates, and chained like a slave to the oar in their galley?"

"No," he replied, with interest; "tell me the tale. It ended happily, I know."

"It happened when I was five years old, and my sainted mother was yet alive. We were not then as rich as we are now, but prosperous. My father had a great venture, in which he had sunk not only all his substance, but borrowed money; coming from the Indies. It was to be shipped at Alexandria, and thither he went himself to act as supercargo. All went well. The caravan arrived safe, the goods were laden on board his vessel, and he set sail for home. After a few days he encountered contrary winds, and was at last becalmed off the coast of Tripoli, where the ship was attacked by Moorish pirates. Three gal-

leys full of armed men grappled her. Her crew—outnumbered twenty to one—made a gallant resistance, but were soon overpowered. She was captured, taken possession of by the pirates, and my dear father, wounded as he was, removed to one of their galleys, and chained to the oar. At first they wished to kill him, for he had struck down one of their leaders, but this was the more cruel fate reserved for him.”

“Horrible!” said Cosmo, with a shudder. “And for how long did he endure such torture?”

“For five days only, thanks be to God! A storm separated the galleys from the ship, and drove that in which he was, out to sea. They were all but wrecked, with broken oars and split sails they lay at the mercy of the waves, which my poor father prayed might overwhelm and free him from his misery. Well, at dawn of the fifth day a ship passed close by—an English ship. The Moors made signs that they were in want of provisions, and the galley was taken alongside. ‘Is there any one on board’ said the Captain, ‘who can understand their tongue?’ There was none. ‘Can any of you speak a language that a Christian can comprehend?’ asked the captain again, after having consulted a tall, handsome man—apparently a passenger—who stood by his side. No answer. Then the passenger made a like demand, first in French, and then, to my poor father’s delight, in Italian. ‘I can,’ he cried. ‘Oh, signor, these are pirates; they have taken my ship and chained me here. Help, help, for the love of God!’ Although the Moors did not understand his words they saw their effect, and hastened to cast off the ropes which bound the galley to the ship, but in an instant that passenger was at my father’s side, sword in hand, and at his call the English sailors came swarming down, and soon the tables were turned. The pirates were bound and my father free. He had barely time to tell all that had happened, when he fainted from exhaustion and pain. His wound, his exposure to the cruel weather, and his agony of mind brought on a fever, through which

his deliverer nursed him like a brother; and the first thing he heard when he regained consciousness was, that the gallant English, instigated by that good man, had put back, intercepted his own vessel, and recaptured her.”

“But he was no gainer by that,” Cosmo observed.

“Our law gave him back one-third, and the English were quite contented with their share.”

“I hope the passenger was richly rewarded?”

“He would not accept anything but some curiously carved iron-work—of no real value—there was on board; but he has his reward—the good God will bless him. His name is in my prayers morn and night.”

“Tell me that name, caressima, that I, too, may honor it.”

“HUGO DESMOND.”

“Hast seen him, thou?”

“Once only, when—” she checked herself, and flushed crimson, “but that is a secret to be kept even from thee!”

“Have a care,” said her lover. “I may be jealous of this tall, handsome cavalier.”

“Foolish one! it was six years ago, when I was yet a child, and—well, I may tell thee this much—he has a wife whom he loves dearly.”

“Shall I see—shall I know him?”

“I think not: he lives a roving life. Join your prayers with mine, if you love me, Cosmo, that the blessed saints may have him in their care—him, and all dear to him. Thou dost pray, my Cosmo?”

“Sometimes,” replied the young noble, drily.

“Ah, Cosmo! promise me thou wilt do so always.”

“Always!”

“Nay, thou knowest what I would. Promise that morn and eve, when I am kneeling to Heaven, I may know that thou also art seeking pardon and mercy amidst thy perils.”

“And a blessing for Hugo Desmond?” he asked with a loving smile.

“Aye, dearest, and a blessing for Hugo Desmond.”

The merchant came bustling in as they

were speaking, his jolly face one smile, but when he heard that name it suddenly became serious.

"What of Hugo Desmond?" he asked, almost severely.

"Marcelina was telling of thy escape from captivity, my good host, as a warning to me of the perils of the sea, and she bade me pray for thy brave deliverer."

"Was that all?" said Bosco, turning to his daughter.

"My father, can you doubt——" she began.

"Enough," he interrupted, in a low voice. "I know I can trust thee. My lord," he said aloud, "there is not a man in all this world whom I revere—nay, love—as I love Hugo Desmond. But for him this dear child would have been fatherless. I owe my life, my fortune, to him. I love all Englishmen for his sake. He is a man of men; earnest, generous, brave. 'Twould do thee no harm to pray for such an one, or to find such an one at thy side in the hour of need. But what hast thou to do with the perils of the sea?"

"I am bound for England, good Bosco. Thou must aid me, my friend, to find a ship."

"That can I do right easily," said the merchant. "One of mine own will sail in a few days, and, if it please thee, thou shalt have passage in her. But must thou leave us so soon?"

"In good sooth I am pressed for time, but on my return——"

"'Tis well, thou knowest best thine own affairs, and 'tis a fair season for the voyage."

"Say, my father," asked Marcelina, "be there pirates now?"

"A fig for pirates!" cried Bosco; "I am wiser than I was. The good ship *Venus* has teeth, my child; four goodly culverins that would sink them and their cursed galleys ere they could say Marshallah! Our fair guest shall sail in her, and—if his business detain him not too long—she shall await his return."

"Thou art not a prince of merchants, as they call thee, but a king," said Cosmo, pressing his hand. "A thousand thanks. I take thee at thy word. The time will

come when it will be my joy to try and act as nobly by thee as thou dost to me this day."

"My Lord Cosmo Ribolini," said the merchant with dignity, "the service I offer you is but a small one; it is done in the due course of my business, and costs me nothing; but were it ten times greater it would not warrant what thou hast said. Thou hast deigned to speak as though we were equals; we are not, and can never be. Thou art a noble—I, a trader. No service of mine can bridge over the gulf between us. The noblest conduct thou canst follow is to bear the existence of that gulf ever in thy mind."

A rapid glance passed between the lovers, and each heart beat, "Can he suspect?"

He did not suspect, but he feared. He knew his daughter's character too well to entertain the common dread his order had of gay young nobles; and wild as Cosmo Ribolini was represented to be, there was that about him which satisfied his host that he would not abuse his hospitality, or he would not have welcomed him as he did. But there was unhappiness, which might fall upon his only child. This handsome Cosmo might win her heart in spite of herself, and, as he could not give her his hand, the careful parent was glad of the opportunity made by his too fervid expression of thanks, to warn them both as he did. His words, "*the noblest conduct thou canst follow is to bear the existence of that gulf ever in thy mind*," sank deep into both their hearts.

Later on, when alone with Marcelina, he returned to the subject.

"The Count Ribolini is old, and, I hear, afflicted with an incurable malady, which may end his days at any moment. I marvel much that he should send his only son on so long a voyage. Did he tell thee what the business was?"

"No, nor did I ask him."

"Thou didst right. The affairs of these nobles are naught to us, my daughter. Mayhap it is some scheme of marriage."

A cold shudder passed through her, but she forced a smile and said—

"Are the ladies of Italy so ill-favored

that he need seek a bride in that cold island?"

"Such as the Ribolini do not *seek* their brides, my child; they are found for them. They marry to uphold and increase the family power. Beauty, or even love, has little part in their unions. We are more happy. Thou canst give thy heart with thy hand, my Marcelina; and thy old father is rich enough to let thee have thy choice—he be an honest man, and thy equal."

She did not answer him, although there was a tone of interrogation in his last words; but changed the subject.

"Wilt thou not send some greeting to our benefactor?"

"No."

"Father mine, should he by any means learn that the Count Cosmo was our friend, and had left us empty-handed, he would deem it unkind, ungrateful."

"Not so."

"And his dear wife—that beautiful lady I saw but for a few moments, but shall always remember"—Marcelina persisted; "she would delight to hear from her country. I know I should if I lived in a foreign land."

"Marcelina, I conjure thee to say no more. Dearly as I love Hugo Desmond, I forbid thee to mention his name to anyone, or to speak again of that—of that lady."

"Oh, father! is she not a good woman?"

"As good as the angels in heaven, but she is the cause of his being in deadly peril. Thou art of an age to understand such matters, and—well, it is good that thou shouldst know. That lady is of noble birth; I know not her name or her lineage. I did not ask, and I will not. Hugo would have trusted me with the secret, but I bade him not. I might unwittingly have betrayed it and him. It rested with the priest who married them in this very house six years ago, and he is dead. Desmond, a man of the people, the son of a merchant like myself, mark you, my child—stole a noble maiden, and if her kin can ever find him they will slay him."

"Oh horrible!"

"'Tis their law. They brook no un-

equal marriages with man or woman. I tell you again, if the father or the brothers of that lady can ever trace Hugo Desmond—God grant they never may!—he is a doomed man. No power can save him, no sanctuary protect him. Wherefore, my child, be prudent; the very walls have ears. I love thee that thou bearest the name of this good man in reverence. Let it be between thee and thy God; and, above all, not a word of the lady—not a word of the secret marriage—only remember what I have said. Nobles who mate below them bring death as a marriage-portion."

He left her stunned with this awful warning.

For the next three days she avoided meeting Cosmo, save in the presence of her father; and her lover—lover-like—set down her sad silence to sorrow at their approaching separation, and her affectionate fears for his safety. To distract her thoughts, he assumed a gayness he was far from feeling, and this cut her to the heart.

"*He must know*," she mused, "the fate his love has brought upon me. If I marry him, I die; if I marry him not, I die. Oh woe is me!"

Then she thought. When his father is dead and he claims me, as he has promised, for his wife—who shall say him nay? We might leave this land where such cruel social laws prevail, and be happy elsewhere, as Hugo Desmond and his high-born bride doubtless are. He must have thought of this. But what afterwards? An exile, severed from country, home, friends; his rank and splendor lost, would not his heart sometimes grow cold to me as the cause? Better death than that. Should she give him back his troth? Ardently as she loved him, she had not been lightly won. She had fought hard against her passion, but it had conquered her, become part of her, *was* her. Give him up? Better death than that. And so all her thoughts, her hopes, her fears, moved round in a circle, whose centre seemed to be a grave.

The sails of the good ship *Venus* had hardly faded away in the blue horizon,

when a messenger arrived from Mantua, with a packet marked "haste; post haste" for the Viscount Cosmo Ribolini.

What was the purport of that packet? Was it to recall the Count? Had the bearer no verbal message Bosco asked. The courier had no such message, only the packet. He knew nothing about it, only this—that the old lord had been found dead in his bed two days after his son had left him!

What was to be done? The *Venus* was one of the fastest ships of her day. There was no chance of overtaking her, and Cosmo had left no address where he might be found in England! There was no necessity, he said—he would return so soon—but the merchant had pressed upon him a letter of recommendation, and credit to his (Bosco's) correspondent, Martin Earle, the goldsmith of London. He would perhaps know how to communicate the news. Bosco went to the port and found that another ship was loading, but would not sail for at least a month. Like a prince as he was, he took up the charter, and despatched her at once, half laden.

CHAPTER VI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

MARTIN EARLE the goldsmith, lived at the sign of the "Crown" in Lombard street—lived and carried on his business, as his father and his grandfather had done before him, in that same house. There also lived his "'prentices," until such time as they should set up in business for themselves, or join him in partnership, as industrious "'prentices" sometimes did. A sound, wealthy, hard-headed man was Martin Earle, and a kind-hearted to boot. He had no care. What banking business was done in those days belonged to the goldsmiths. They lent money, sold letters of credit and so on, in a safe old-fashioned way. There was no speculation, in our sense of the term, and little rivalry amongst them; for they had each his own customers at home and abroad, and in many cases his special connection with foreign parts

in the enjoyment of which he was left undisturbed.

Thus, did your business call you to Paris or to the Indies, or had you a debt to recover at Smyrna or Madrid, you could find out without much trouble to whom you should apply for funds, information, or assistance. Martin Earle was a member of the company of merchants trading to the Levant, then not long incorporated, and had business of weight with Mediterranean ports.

He had two "'prentices," but unfortunately for them, no daughters for marriage. He was childless, but one of those "'prentices"—his nephew—stood to him as a son, and was destined some day to inherit his wealth. Young Richard Earle was a cut above the ordinary "'prentice" lad of the period. He had been given more schooling than ordinarily came to their lot, and being spared much of the common drudgery of his class, had time to digest and add to what he had learned. Nevertheless, when "'prentices! clubs!" was the cry in Cheapside, this gallant was always foremost in the fray, and although the indulgence shown to him threw some extra work upon his fellow, John Eastman, they were the best of friends.

Dick Earle was a bit of a dandy, and lazy with hands and heels when there was no fighting going on. He had a fine capacity for looking on when hard work was to the fore, or ordinary customers to be served, but let a lady come into the shop, there was no one like Dick to persuade her that she must have this buckle or chain, and beguile her of her broad pieces. It was customary with goldsmiths to send new or curious wares round to their patrons for inspection, and many a noble mansion had handsome Dick entered, not unsuccessfully, on such missions. Moreover he was a scholar. Not only could he read and write English, but he had set himself to learn Italian—then, as now, the language of Levantine commerce—and by the time we make his acquaintance, was able to translate and answer the letters which his uncle and master received from abroad.

One fine July afternoon, there strolled

into Lombard street a young gentleman clad in raiment of a foreign cut, with that half nervous, half puzzled expression upon his face which the Briton who finds himself for the first time in a strange city may see reflected in the plate glass windows. He had the idea that everyone was watching him, and asking themselves what he wanted; whereas, no one troubled himself about him. He went into several houses and quickly came out; the puzzled and nervous look changing into one of vexation. He gave a fierce twist to his moustache, and then he laughed. What was the use of getting angry because people did not understand him. He crossed the road to where Martin Earle sat in the sunshine before his shop, and made as though he would speak to him, but the jolly John Bull face of the goldsmith did not seem to promise well, and he was in the act of passing on, when he pricked up his ears and stopped. What had he heard? The *refrain* of an Italian boat song, rolled out in a pleasant tenor.

"Pardon me, sir," he said in the same tongue, "but there is one——"

A roar of "Ho, Dick!" interrupted him, and out came the warbler.

"An Italian gentleman, Dick. Speak to him; speak him fairly, boy," said Martin Earle.

The stranger's face brightened at the sound of his own language, as that of a starving man who is welcomed to food.

"What could be done for his Excellency?"

His Excellency desired to find one Martin Earle.

"Why, that's me, *me*, ME," said the goldsmith giving to his own broad chest three digs, each one harder than the other, just as he emphasised the pronoun. Worthy man! He thought, as do many of his descendants, that if you speak bad grammar loudly, and gesticulate a little, foreigners are sure to understand you. And this foreigner did understand, and understanding him, addressed him, whereupon the goldsmith scratched his head, and looked imploringly at Dick. More conversation in Italian ensued between the two who could speak it, in the course of which the

one who could not, caught the name of Bosco.

"Not old Bartolomeo?" cried the latter. "Does he speak of my friend? Has he come from Bosco of Venice? Has he aught for me from Bosco? Quit thy grimacing, thou jackanapes!" (this to Dick). "And answer me."

"Prythee, good uncle, interrupt us not. How can I tell thee till I hear myself?"

"Thou wilt learn nothing by bowing and scraping and waving thy cap, malapert! Ask him roundly cometh he from Bosco?"

Again the stranger appeared to understand. It is not the fashion to come straight to your point amongst his countrymen. Southern politeness requires a good deal of beating about the bush, but the anxiety evinced by Martin Earle had its reward, and in a few minutes Master Dick was able to translate their visitor's business.

He had, indeed, come from Bartolomeo Bosco, of Venice, and had a letter from that worthy to his friend, but unfortunately it was in his baggage, which was following him. He had landed about a week ago at Southampton, and was bound for Manchester, but had undergone so much trouble and delay on his journey through ignorance of English, that he had resolved not to go on alone. His object was to find this Martin Earle, to whom he had been recommended to apply in case of need, and ask him to provide a guide and interpreter. He had waited for his luggage to arrive until he was out of patience; indeed, he almost feared it was lost on the way, so he sallied out in quest of the man he relied upon, and lo! he had stumbled upon him when about to give up the search in despair. Now if he had gone into any shop within half a mile, and simply said, "Martin Earle," he would have got the required information, but he doffed his plumed hat, and begged to be excused, and gave the "time of day," and compliments, all in an unknown tongue to those he addressed, by way of polite preliminary, and only got stared at for his pains. His dress, though of costly material, was travel-stained, and perhaps

those good people thought he wanted something beyond information, and gave him the brusque "No, no, no; don't understand," which Britons, even in these enlightened times, will rap out when addressed, hat in hand, by foreigners of seedy appearance.

But his troubles were over now. Martin Earle would not even hear all that Dick had to translate. It was enough for him to know that his visitor came from Bosco. He hustled him into the house, and roared out to have the great chamber prepared, and a meal spread instantly. It was part of his creed—and a good creed, too—that a traveller must be hungry—or thirsty, anyhow. In this case he was right. The money Cosmo Ribolini put in his purse when he left Southampton had been exhausted some days, and already the Drawers at his hostel in the Barbican had begun to mistrust a guest without a change of raiment, who ate and drank of the best. The goldsmith was delighted to see him do such justice to the viands set before him, and hear the contented "ha-a" with which he put down his first goblet of *Lacrimæ Christi*. To taste your own drink in a strange land is almost as good as hearing your own tongue. I, who write, am old enough to remember the days when the wandering Briton was not sure of his bitter beer abroad, and I have emitted just such another "ha-a" as did the noble Cosmo—over the humble pewter as soon as possible after landing at St. Katharine's Wharf. It would have been all the more refreshing if it had been found under other skies, as was the bright liquor which went straight to the cockles of the young Mantuan's heart. He ate and drank his fill, Dick waiting upon him, and his host buzzing about like a great hospitable bumble-bee, and asking every moment "What sayeth he? what doth he need?" as though every sentence were a request. Then came further explanations.

Taking his cue from his worthy kinsman, Count Vincenti de la Torre, the elder Ribolini had ordered his son to take an assumed name on his travels, and this he had already done. Mine host of the "Gold Boar" knew him as Master Pietri, and

Master Pietri he would have remained, but for this accident to his baggage.

Politeness required him to accept the letter of recommendation to Martin Earle which Bosco had offered, but he had no intention of using it. He did not want them to know in Venice that his mission was of such a character as to require a falsehood. Stern necessity obliged him to appear in his true colors, and the good goldsmith, who had taken him for a clerk, or a travelling agent at the best, was awestruck when he found that he had entertained a viscount unawares.

"Gramercy!" he cried, "I've slapped him on the back, and he is a lord!"

The Italian's mother wit turned this to good account.

"See now," he said to Dick, "what a change has come over you all now you know my rank! It was much better at first, only I could not deceive you. Let it be as it was. I want to see your country in a familiar manner. I can do so much better as a simple gentleman, than as a noble of Italy. I pray thee beg thy good uncle to forget what in honor I have told him, and let me be always Signor Pietri. My title as the friend of Bosco of Venice has served me so well, that I need no other."

There was nothing strange in men of rank travelling incognito, and so he was allowed to have his way. None but Dick, the interpreter, and his uncle, knew the secret. A change of linen was looked out for him, and Dick lent him a bran new suit, just out of the tailor's hands, and designed, no doubt, to destroy the peace of mind of Fleet street belles.

Old Martin played his part pretty well except once, when—nothing having been heard for some days of the visitor's baggage—his housekeeper, careful woman! breathed fears that he might be an impostor. Then the cat was very nearly let out of the bag. At last the arrant valises turned up, whereat the goldsmith was delighted, but did not slap his guest on the back again.

In the meantime Dick—who did not stand much in awe of lords—took Cosmo (or Signor Pietri) about, and showed him

the London of that day in style, with the assistance of the goldsmith's broad pieces. It was a rare time for Dick, and he made the most of it, you may be sure. The two became fast friends, and Master 'Prentice jumped at the idea of prolonging the enjoyment by becoming himself the guide and companion which the Italian sought.

"We will take our time," said the latter, "and have a pleasant journey. There are places of interest between this and Manchester?"

"Of a surety," Dick replied. "Why, there's Oxford."

"I would fain visit that seat of learning."

"'Tis not on the direct road."

"No matter."

"Then on the way back——" began Dick.

"I shall trouble thee no further than to Manchester," the other interrupted. "I hope to find a countryman there who speaks English, and will relieve thee of thy burden."

"It is no 'burden,'" replied the 'prentice; "but of course your excellency" (Dick liked to excellency him when they were alone) "will be glad to be once more with your own people and with your own class."

"I am not so sure of that," Cosmo said half to himself; "my own people and my own class impose things upon me which I would gladly escape. They impose things upon me in which thou, Ricardo mio, must not be mixed up."

"I should not presume——" Dick began, apologetically.

"No, no, it is not that. I see what is passing in thy mind. It is not what you think. I am not ashamed of thee, *altro*! I would call thee my friend before them all. Would to God they were half as honest and true as thou art; but—I cannot tell thee why thou must leave me in Manchester. Trust me that it is for thy good. Mayhap thou wilt hear something, and then——. Thou canst not understand my conduct, but promise that thou wilt not condemn it."

"You speak as though you condemned it yourself," replied honest Dick.

There was a tone of indecision and sorrow in his companion's last address quite unnatural to him, and which Dick did not like.

"The Holy Virgin help me!" Cosmo moaned; "sometimes I do. Thou hast no father?"

"He died when I was a child, but my uncle——"

"Yes, yes, I know. Thou loveth him well. Uncles are not fathers though. If thy father lived, and he laid it upon thee to do a certain thing, thou wouldst obey, and do it?"

"If it were right."

"He would be the judge of that."

"Not so," persisted sturdy Dick.

"How! Thou wouldst not venerate a father's command?"

"Not if it were to do an ill deed."

"If his blessing depended upon thy obedience?"

"The blessing of one who would so order is nothing worth."

"Is *this* thy English faith?"

"Of a verity it is. Of what avail is a father's blessing if it bring down the curse of God and the contempt of all honest men?"

"Thou speakest safely, as thou hast no father."

"My father was an honest man, and would not have laid upon me aught that was wrong, as—as——"

"Proceed. As mine has done, thou wouldst say. Tush! Thou art an honest lad; but meddle not with what thou canst not comprehend."

It was the haughty Mantuan noble who spoke now, not Signor Pietri.

Dick flushed up too.

"Nay, I meddle not. Go thine own way. But," he added, quickly, "if there be plotting against the king——"

"There is not, on my soul—on my word there is not!" interrupted the other, warmly. "Have no fear; there is naught that can implicate thee. Why, man! I was but drawing thee out. Dost think that a Ribolini would lead any man, much less his son, from the path of honor?"

Dick had not read of Machiavel's famous inquiry as to the origin of evil, but he said

to himself, "There's a woman in this." And, indeed, there was that in Signor Pietri's manner—his absent thoughts, his forced gaiety at times, and his occasional fits of moody silence—which bore out the idea that he was a victim to the son of Venus. So the discussion above recorded did not remain long on Dick's mind (nothing did), and they were as good friends afterwards as before.

The goldsmith was curious to know what was the purport of Cosmo's business in Lancashire, and asked Dick privately if he had any knowledge of it.

Dick had none, and told his master what their visitor had said about parting there.

"It is my belief," he concluded, "that the less we ask him about it the better he will be pleased."

"Oh, I seek not to meddle," said Martin Earle; "only, for Bosco's sake, I would do all in my power for the gentleman. I was thinking that I might offer him a recommendation to my good friend Hugh Desmond, who lives there."

"Leave him to his own people, uncle mine," said Dick.

"Thou knowest Master Desmond?"

"Surely."

"Well, thou canst see him when thou hast discharged thy mission, and greet him for me."

There was only one person whom these arrangements did not suit, and that was John Eastman.

Dick had broken several people's heads for calling his fellow-'prentice "his dog." There was an implied sneer at John in this, which was lost upon its object, who was quite content to be his idol's "dog," in the sense of a creature who loved him and was faithful, and would fly at the throat of any one who attacked him.

"I'd sooner be Dick Earl's dog than your master," he would growl, in answer to the charge.

To find himself dethroned from his high estate, and, worse still, to see Dick become the "dog" of a foreign stranger, was gall and wormwood to John. He had the true 'prentice distrust and contempt for foreign-

ers in general; and this one in particular filled him with suspicion.

John Eastman was no fool. He noticed that both Dick and his uncle treated the stranger, when they thought they were alone with him, with marked deference. They sought to "hedge," so to speak, in this way for familiarities which they were obliged to use in public. There was that letter, too, from Bosco of Venice. Why had the goldsmith locked it up in his private drawer, instead of placing it with the rest of the correspondence?

"If I could only get that for an hour or two, I should know something, though it is written in Italian."

What a power is jealousy? Nothing short of it could have made bluff John Eastman an eavesdropper, and a would-be purloiner of his master's keys.

CHAPTER VII.

"I HAVE THEE NOW; GOOD MASTER DESMOND."

I HAVE left Master Hugh Desmond too long under an accusation of having committed murder and buried his victim in the old brewhouse. His innocence is best proved by my stating at once, that the bones found by the constable and his men were not human relics at all. The one examined by Signor Porras showed (literally) the *cloven hoof*; but he smiled, and kept his own counsel.

Anything that would excite the people against Desmond was in his programme, and fearfully excited they were. Short shrift would he have had if they could have captured him there. But what did he want with a pile of ox bones? Simply this.—He was no mean chemist, and had found out for himself that the mode then in vogue for making phosphorous was complicated, slow, and nasty; and that nearly all afforded by materials (which shall be nameless) then in use, was to be gotten out of bones—but he did not succeed. The secret lay hid for a hundred and fifty years, and he was only blindly groping upon its track, as on that of the

other great discovery which glimmered upon him in the explosion of that unholy flacon.

The black looks and murmurs which followed his unexpected appearance in the street, after the application of Dame Martha's Holy Water test, half amused, half vexed him. How could they be so foolish! His experiment in presence of Master Symes showing how the explosion had been caused, though successful in one respect, failed in another. Symes shook his head, told him that no demonstration of the kind would remove the popular belief that he dealt with unholy arts, and prayed him, for the Lord's sake, to get him out of the town, and let the excitement blow over.

"Thou hast made an enemy of Master Willford," he added, "and he will leave no stone unturned to work thy ruin."

Now, Hugh Desmond had already determined to depart the next morning, so he was able to follow this good advice without any derangement of his plans. He left, with the consequences already described, and soon what he supposed to be a more pressing danger banished all thoughts of his Manchester persecutors from his mind. That pretended beggar, with a scar on his face, whom "Sweetheart" had fed at his gate, and unconsciously answered in her native tongue—troubled him.

As he was riding back from his last visit to his wife he had met that very man, well-dressed and well-mounted, and he had asked his way to Stafford. There might be several Italians tall and gaunt, and with scars on their faces, going about on business in no way connected with him; but a presentiment of evil which he could not throw off attached itself to this man.

Again and again he questioned his wife, and begged her to recall every detail respecting the object of her charity. Which way had he come—which way did he go? Had he seen the children? Had he spoken to anyone but herself? Had he asked her any questions?

She could not say which way he came. When first she saw him he was laying on

the ground outside the gate. He had craved leave to stay there after his meal—he was so tired! She thought he did not leave till nightfall. Yes, he had asked her for her husband. How could he know she was married? How could she tell!

"Am I not old enough and pretty enough to be wedded?" she said; "and hast thou come back after so long to talk of nothing but a wretched mendicant? Talk to me of thy dear self. What hast been doing? Where hast thou been?"

He returned her caresses, but answered not. The dread that had vaguely haunted him since their flight took a fixed form and made him shudder in her arms. Suddenly he said—

"We must leave this place, Maria."

"We! Ah, that is good," she cried, looking up from his breast into his troubled face, undisturbed by its gloom. "We—then we shall go together?"

"Yes, dear one, together."

The sweet face was nestled again on his breast, quite contented.

"Thou dost not ask whither?" he said.

"What matters whither, so thou be there?"

"We will go to London. There is safety in a crowd. In that busy city none will notice us." This musing to himself. "When could'st thou be ready for the journey?"

"To-morrow, nay, in two hours if it please thee, but——"

"Well?"

"Hast noted that little Hugo is looking pale? Is't a long journey to London?"

"For thee, and the little ones—yes."

"'Tis nothing. The child has been pining for thee. 'Twill pass now thou art here."

But the father's kiss was not so potent a remedy as Sweetheart hoped. Little Hugh was really ill, became worse, and for a time his life hung upon a thread. There was no going to London for a long time yet.

One day, when the father had ridden in to Stafford for some medicines for his child, he was surprised to hear his name called after him in the street. He turned, and a smart young fellow in riding-dress came up much out of breath.

"Gramercy, how you walk, Master Desmond!" he panted. "Dost thou not remember me? I am Dick Earle, nephew of Martin Earle, the goldsmith, at whose house thou lodged last year, in London."

"Remember thee! That do I well. How is it with thy worthy uncle? And what doeth thou here?"

"Oh, uncle is hearty, as usual. He often speaks of thee, Master Desmond. By the way, that reminds me, he heard lately from thy friend Signor Bosco, of Venice."

"Ha," said Hugh, a cloud passing over his brow; "what of Bosco?"

"He, too, is well and prosperous. His ship, the *Venus*, has arrived at Southampton, with a rich cargo of silks, and —"

Here Dick checked himself; his tongue loosened, as young tongues will be, by the unexpected sight of a pleasant acquaintance, was running away with him.

"And thou art travelling on his business, I warrant me," said Desmond.

"Not exactly," Dick replied somewhat drily.

They sauntered on towards the hostel where Desmond had left his horse, and at the door thereof found two steeds saddled as for a journey, and a third bearing baggage, in charge of a groom. Beside one of the former, booted and spurred, and looking impatient, stood Signor Pietri.

"Well, keep thine own counsel," Desmond replied. "'Twas but an idle question."

"Nay, nay, Master Desmond, there is no secret," said Dick. "I am but acting as guide to this gentleman who speaks not English, and has business in the North."

He indicated Signor Pietri with a wave of the hand, and instinctively the two raised their hats. They had been both abroad, you know, and did not glare at each other in proper British form.

"God speed thee, my boy; a happy journey and a safe return," said Desmond. "And when thou seest thy good uncle, fail not to tell him thou didst meet with Hugh Desmond, and give him warm greeting from me."

Signor Pietri's foot was in the stirrup, but at the sound of that name he withdrew

it, and with a flush of pleasure and surprise whispered a question in Dick's ear.

"The same," replied the 'prentice; "but caution—caution!"

"Fear not," said the Italian in an under one. Then, turning to Hugh, he bowed till the plume of his hat swept the ground, and thus greeted him in his own language.

"Signor Desmond, this is an honor which I had hoped for, but little expected. I have heard of thee in my own country. Bosco of Venice is my friend, and the Signorina—Oh, sir! after the holy saints, your name is held most sacred by her. It was she who told me of your noble rescue of her father, with smiles and tears of gratitude. Nay, I must speak. I know you English are unemotional—that you love not open praise. Then I will say no more of your noble acts. I plead for myself. Give me the happiness, the honor of kissing that good, that valiant hand, as thy friend."

He would have knelt to kiss that hard, brown hand, if Hugh had not prevented him. With the sound of the name he had heard pronounced with so much love, in the soft Venetian twilight, by the lips that were the sweetest in the world to him, came a vision—momentary, but soul-inspiring—of the beautiful grave face of his darling. Thus inspired, his warm southern nature burst out, and swept away all thought of caution.

No such inspiration helped Hugh Desmond to receive this ovation. For him, Marcelina Bosco was a shy little girl, standing between her father's knee, and fidgetting with the packet of *confetti* he had given her. That little affair with the pirates was a drop in the ocean of his experiences. He had almost forgotten all about it.

"Was that wisely done, most Illustrious?" expostulated Dick as they rode away.

"Perhaps not," Signor Pietri replied; "'twas an impulse. I could not help myself. If thou hadst heard—bah! you cold-blooded islanders cannot understand. Yet I did in no wise commit myself, most prudent sir. I am a friend of his friend, that is all."

"He lives in Manchester, and may encounter thee there."

"No matter," said Cosmo.

Then Dick was told the story of Bosco's capture by pirates, and his rescue by Hugh Desmond, of which the 'prentice had not heard. He only knew that Desmond had led a wandering, eventful life, and had rendered some valuable service to the merchant, by whom he had been introduced (much has Cosmo had been) to Martin Earle. The narrator was still under the spell, and did full justice to his hero. In conclusion he said, "It is an honor to know such a man. That, for his birth, or what he may have done before that noble action or since, one who could act as he did must be a gentleman."

"And capable of understanding generous emotions," Dick observed drily, "though he is a cold-blooded islander."

"A fair hit," laughed Signor Pietri; "thou hast me there."

Things having gone so far, Dick narrated what had passed between him and his uncle, the goldsmith, respecting an introduction to this same master Desmond.

"And why didst stay him?" asked the Italian half angrily.

"Shall I tell thee the plain truth?"

"Speak candidly."

"Because thou hast been silent—moodily silent—on all that pertains to thy object in visiting Manchester. Because if it pleased thee to know any there, thou couldst have asked my uncle for such an introduction, and because I would not have him offer what might displease thee—that is the plain truth."

"All of it?"

"Well, thou toldest me thou hadst friends there, and I said, 'Leave him to his own people.'"

Cosmo ground his teeth, and made no answer for some time. "Thou was right," he said at last; "leave me to mine own people—when I find them, but till then, good Dick, let us enjoy ourselves." And on they rode merrily.

"We shall be in Manchester to-morrow, at this rate," said Dick; but they were not destined to see that town. They were crossing a piece of heath as he spoke,

around which the road curved. A fine piece of galloping ground to all appearance, but as the words passed his lips, Cosmo's horse put his foot into a rabbit hole, stumbled and fell upon its rider, crushing him woefully.

As Desmond passed through the avenue of limes which led to his house, night had set in, but Maria ran out to meet him with that upon her face which made his heart give a great leap, and brought the cry, "My God! the child?" to his lips.

"Is well—is better, I think," she said; "but oh, Hugo! that beggar man! He has been here again."

"And spoke to thee?" he asked, dismounting, and throwing his arms around her.

"No, not to me—to another—thanks be to heaven thou hast come! My head ached with watching, I suppose, and little Hugo slept, so I came out for the fresh air, and sat down yonder by those shrubs which hide the garden from the road. I was tired and slept—not for long. The sound of horses' hoofs awoke me. At first I thought it was thee, and hid to surprise thee as thou passed; but it was the beggar man, Hugo, and another, whose face I could not see, and they halted within a few yards of where I crouched, and spoke of thee, my darling. My darling, they seek to do thee evil."

"Be composed, sweetheart, be brave; tell me all they said."

"I will try," she said, dashing away her tears. "He—the beggar—was dressed like a serving man; but the other called him cousin."

"They spoke Italian?"

"Of course. I did not catch the first words of the one with the scar, but his companion replied, 'Certes, it is he! Once thou hadst found the nest, 'twas but a matter of time to catch the male bird in it. The discoveries I made in his laboratory at Manchester were all but conclusive, and now that we have tracked him here, there is no room for doubt. I have thee now, good Master Desmond.' Oh, my Hugo! there was murder in his tone."

"Go on, go on—the rest?"

"Then the beggar, or he that——"

"I understand; go on."

"Said, 'What is to be done? Will you act now?' And the other replied, 'I cannot till I have received an answer from Mantua.' Do you mark me, Hugo?—from Mantua!"

Desmond groaned, and held her tighter in his arms.

"'In the meantime, the bird may fly,' said the beggar. 'Not so,' replied the other; 'he dare not go back to Manchester, and has no suspicion that we have discovered him. No, no; he will stay here, and is as much in my power as though I had my heel on his throat and my dagger at his heart.' Those were his very words."

"Did aught else pass between them?"

"The beggar said, 'Well, it is thy business, not mine; if it were, I should make sure at once.' Then the other fell to musing, and said, after a pause, 'I am half sorry that I wrote as I did, though it seemed for the best at the time; but, having done so, I must needs bide the issue. How long is't since thou wert here the first time?' 'Nearly four months,' was the reply. 'Let us hasten back now thou art convinced; for the answer from Mantua may come any day now,' said his companion; and with that they turned their horses' heads and rode away. Oh, Hugo, Hugo! What does it mean?"

He told her—there was no help for it now—he told her all he had dreaded, and showed how well founded were his fears.

"I have brought a curse upon him," she moaned. "Woe is me! I have brought a curse upon my love!"

She besought him to fly, and leave her and the children.

"They will not hurt us," she said.

But he knew better.

"We will all away together, Sweetheart," he replied, in as gay a voice as he could assume. "Grant that the answer they expect has already arrived, they cannot be back here in less than three days; and tomorrow, please God, little Hugh will be well enough to travel on my knee."

"They will hunt us wherever we go," sobbed his wife.

"Hunted creatures will turn at bay," said the old Buccaneer, with a flash in his eyes which boded no good to the hunters.

He had already formed his plan. He would remove his dear ones from immediate danger, and then carry the war into the enemies' country. He would face that bloodthirsty pair on their return, and quench the last spark of danger in their blood. A narrow road, a dark night, a sudden shot for the one and equal steel with his chief, and Sweetheart might sleep in peace.

In peace, and he away, with no one to protect her! More careful consideration conjured up a score of possible perils. He might miss his foes; they might pass him, and track him whilst he was seeking them. Was there no one he could rely upon to stand by her and help him? Yes, there was. Stout Gregory Denys—the very man! But how reach Gregory?

"Well, there is a way for that," mused Hugh Desmond, "if gratitude lives deeper than in words."

He had just then but one servant. The old woman who had taken the place of the defunct Bertha had left a day or two ago, and, for the moment, could not be replaced. A youth whom he had picked up, friendless and starving, some years ago, in the streets of Smyrna, sufficed. This unfortunate had run away to sea when almost a child; had joined in a sailor's frolic in that distant port, got lost, missed his ship, and was left to the tender mercies of the Turks. Small store of education had he, but a power of mother wit. He had a vague idea that there was some sort of a God in heaven, though he put his trust chiefly in one he had made for himself on earth—Hugh Desmond. He was now sixteen years of age, a slip of a boy, but hardy as a young oak-tree, and faithful as a dog.

When Sweetheart had retired to rest, her lord descended to the outer regions, and woke this boy.

"Art awake, Tom?"

"Aye, master."

"Canst ride to Manchester, my lad?"

"Aye, master."

"Canst be discreet; do what thou'rt told, and hold thy tongue?"

"I'll do thy will, and say naught," Tom replied.

The word "discreet" bothered him. He was not sure if he could do that.

"Dost know the road?"

"I'll find it somehow."

"Ask thy way as little as thou canst help, and ride as fast as my horse will carry thee. Start at daybreak; seek out Gregory Denys at my house (thou knowest where), give him this ring for a token, and bid him take horse and follow thee."

"Back here, master?"

"No. To the old mill at Morton-of-the-King, where we stayed awhile on our way here."

"Where you shot the mallards, master?"

"Right. But pass not this way. Go by the ford at the Hallowfield. The money thou wilt want is in this belt; strap it round thee, and put my smaller pistols in thy holsters—they are loaded. And, mark me, Tom, if thou shouldst see two foreigners on the road—one a tall, dark man, with a scar on his cheek—keep out of their view, and pass them, if possible; but if thou *shouldst* meet them at a halting-place, and their horses should go lame, or get loose, or anything else happen by *accident*—dost mark me, Tom, by accident?—to hinder them on their journey without delaying thee—why, I do not think that any honest man would be sorry."

No magpie gloating over a stolen sixpence could look more cunning than did Tom; but he only answered, "Aye, master," as usual.

The first faint streaks of dawn had hardly appeared, when the clatter of hoofs told Desmond that his messenger was on his way. He had not closed his eyes that night, and still laid awake to think. Those unwelcome visitors had left about four o'clock on the previous day, and their horses—so Sweetheart told him, in reply to further questions—appeared tired. A small village about ten miles on, but rather out of their way, would probably be their halting-place. Even if they started again

the same time with Tom, the fine horse he rode, lightly weighted, would pick up their jaded steeds. Tom would beat them full six hours into Manchester, though no "accident" happened, and would be back with the stout young smith in time.

A movement of the sick child disturbed his reverie.

"Art in pain, my boy?"

"No, papa; only thirsty."

He took his little hand; it was cool and moist.

"Thank God!" he said fervently, as, having sipped the drink prepared for him, little Hugh turned upon his pillow, and lapsed again into a healthy sleep.

Then the whilom Buccaneer, who oft had scoffed at priests and churches, fell on his knees and prayed. No well-worn formula of supplication—nothing but the cry of his heart for help and strength to protect these helpless dear ones.

* * * * *

Away sped Tom Stevens, pleased with himself, and proud of his mission, till he came to a heath, round which the road wound. There was a track across it, by following which he could save half a mile, so he took it.

"Holloa!" he said to himself as he was about half over, "there's been a scuffle here." And indeed the ground cut up by marks of horses' hoofs and riders' boots bore out his idea.

He passed on, and regained the road, but it forked into three, and he did not know which to take. Well, there was a hovel hard by where some one lived, and was getting his breakfast, to judge by the smoke which curled out of the half-opened door. He would ask. He rode up, knocked loudly with his whip, and shouted with the air born of his good mount, the gold in his belt, and pistols in his holsters—

"Ho! within there; which of these roads is right for Manchester?"

"Manchester!" repeated a voice. "Who rides to Manchester?" and a young man clad in a smart dress came quickly out of that wretched-looking abode, and laid his hand on Tom's bridle.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE ROAD.

STARTLED by so unexpected an apparition, Tom reined back his horse, and drew a pistol.

"Put up thy weapon, thou popinjay! I mean thee no harm. Dost take me for a cut-purse? There. A noble beast, by my life! Put up thy weapon. See, I bear no arms. I am a peaceful traveller like thyself, and will direct thee on thy way with truth and courtesy an' thou wilt let me. Thou art for Manchester?"

"What is that to thee?"

"Fair words, good youth. Having asked the way, 'tis useless to deny that that is thy destination."

"And what if it be?"

"Much. There has been a sad mishap near this. My companion's horse fell and rolled upon him. He is hurt grievously. If thou doubttest me, come in and see for thyself. He, too, is bound for Manchester, where he has friends, and would fain communicate to them his state, and have some leech sent to tend his hurts. Wait but ten minutes whilst I write a letter, take it for me, and thou wilt not only do a good deed, but shall be rewarded liberally."

Tom wavered. Ten minutes was not much to wait, and he was a kind-hearted lad.

"Who art thou?" he asked.

"My name is Richard Earle, of London; my friend is a foreign gentleman, Signor Pietri."

Tom pricked up his ears. A foreigner! His master had spoken of two journeying together, but this might be one of them. It would be worth his while to see if the disabled man had a scar on his face, and if so, to be able to report that the wished-for accident had happened. More. If it were truly he, that letter for his friends in Manchester might be consigned to the nearest pond, or, better still, carried to Hugh Desmond, and so a further delay ensured. Tom had his wits about him, you see.

So he went in, and whilst our friend Dick was writing under difficulties which somewhat marred the effect of his penman-

ship, took careful stock of his companion who lay groaning on a heap of straw. No. He was not particularly tall, his complexion was fair, and his cheek unscarred.

Honest Tom felt quite sorry for him, and the thought of directing them to his master's house for help came more than once into his mind. He looked around for the owner of the hovel, and there he was in the corner munching a crust of rye bread, and stirring a pot, whose steam suggested the presence of rabbits (not unconnected with onions) in a satisfactory manner to anyone who—like Tom—had had more riding than breakfast that morning. He thought he had seen that man before, when and where he could not remember. He spoke to him, but was no way the wiser for his questions. The fellow was either sulky or stupid. Tom could make nothing out of him—except a breakfast. He had to breakfast somewhere.

Nor had 'prentice Dick—sharp as he was—been more successful with his host, who was really not sulky, but densely, impregnably stupid. Was there any town nearer than Stafford? He did not know. Any country houses about? He did not know. Did he know of any leech? The faintest gleam of intelligence flicked for a moment on his usually vacant face, and disappeared as he shook his head. How long had he lived there? He could not say—since he was a boy. And never went abroad! Never.

"What a life!" thought Dick. "Enough to make an idiot of anyone."

It was the life led by many in those "good old days." The father of this hoveller had "squatted" on the heath and lived (or starved) by selling turf, and osiers for basket-making in Stafford. Sometimes there was a rabbit or two hid away in these consignments unknown to the lord of the manor. The son was content to follow in his sire's steps. He could not have told for his life what king reigned in England, or what day of the week it was. Would he go into Stafford and fetch a doctor? No. He could not walk so far. He was all to pieces with the "shakes." How, then, did he send his goods to mar-

ket? On the donkey. Where was the donkey? Gone there. Where was "there?" Why, to Stafford, to be sure. What, alone! No, the wife was with him.

This was the first mention of his help-mate, and Dick took heart. Much was not to be expected of a woman who could link herself to such a life, but there was comfort in the reflection that she could not possibly be *more* dense than her lord.

Sharp as he was, Dick's mind could not apply itself to two things at a time. So intent was he upon writing that letter for Signor Pietri, and getting Tom Stevens to take it, that he forgot to ask the latter any of the questions he had put in vain to the hoveller, and thought he had done very well when he saw Tom ride away with the missive in his belt. He was barely out of sight when the donkey—bestriden male fashion by a pleasant-looking woman—trotted up to the door.

* * * * *

The road was good, and the weather cloudy, so Tom galloped along and nothing happened worthy of particular mention (as run the Marine protests) until evening, when the rain which had been threatening all day, came down as though it too had to make up for lost time, and he rode his last eight miles through a first-class thunder-storm. He had followed his orders, and his good chestnut was not sorry to see houses and lights, and to hear sounds suggestive of corn and a stable. He gave a little satisfied winney, as horses will do under the circumstances, and pricked up his ears.

"Dost think thou'rt going to see thy master old fellow?" said Tom, who was in the habit of conversing with his charge; "never fear."

This was intended as an assurance that one of his master's sayings, "the first duty of a good traveller is to his beast," was not forgotten. As soon as Hugh Desmond had kissed wife and children, on his return to home, he would follow Hafid to his stall, see him rubbed down, and feed him with his own hand. Tom had no sweetheart to kiss, so he led his tired steed straight through the hostel yard to where the instinct of his class judged the stable would

be. There he saw two horses wet, muddy, jaded, and supperless—who turned their heads and watched him with wistful eyes, poor beasts! as he passed.

"If my master was thine, I wouldn't be the varlet who leaves thee thus," thought Tom.

Then he unsaddled Hafid, washed his legs and mouth, rubbed him dry, fastened him up by the side of his less fortunate brethren, and went off in search of Will Ostler and corn.

"Art not ashamed to treat good dumb cattle thus?" expostulated Desmond's disciple, when he had found that functionary, and returned with him to the stable.

"I had no orders," replied the ostler gruffly.

"To the devil with 'orders!' Hast no sense? I warrant me thou waitest for no orders to get thine own supper."

"What is't to thee! Art their servant?"

"Whose?"

"Why, the two foreigners who came in lately."

"Ho, ho, so two foreigners came in lately, did they?"

The ostler nodded.

"And these are their horses, eh?"

He nodded again.

"Well, it's no affair of mine; I'm not their man. Where is the corn?"

"Hie thee, and dry thy clothes, I'll feed the horse," said the man.

"Not so. Give me the corn, if thou would'st not be worried like a rat by a dog."

"Oh! he bites, does he?"

"Awful!" replied the unveracious Tom. "There's a poor young man down in Staffordshire—but he was too venturesome, and no one was near to warn him."

"Take thy corn," said the ostler quickly, "and tend thy wild beast thyself. I mistrusted his eye from the first."

Now Hafid, like all of his blood, had a remarkably kind and soft eye. Having settled him for the night, Tom returned to the hostel, ordered supper, and proceeded to dry himself (for he had no change) before a huge log fire, which was blazing in the guest's room. He was not the only one so engaged. The masters of

those two horses stood there steaming away, and occasionally cursing somebody or something in a tongue unknown to Tom. There was no mistake now. They were undoubtedly *the* pair to whom an *accident* might happen without causing sorrow to any honest man. Tom thought of the neglected steeds, and wished he had not befriended them.

"A foul night!" said the elder of the two (not he with the scarred face), as he made way for Tom at the fire. "Thou also wert caught in the storm it would seem. Hast ridden far?"

"No, not very," Tom replied carelessly, tugging the while at a boot which stuck like a sucker, and in fact *was* one, till he had stamped the water out of it.

"Art journeying north or south?"

"Neither," said Tom.

"Pardon my questions. The varlet with our sumpter horse has missed us, and we are sorely put to it for a change of raiment. I thought that perchance thou mightest have seen him on thy road."

"I passed him not," Tom replied, after a moment's consideration as to whether it would not be well to send them out on some wild goose chase after the missing domestic, "but the night is black as a wolf's mouth," he added, "and the rain blinding. Peradventure, he has lost his way."

"Very like. 'Tis an addle-pated knave."

By this time Tom had got his boots off, and his doublet, and was engaged drying the former by pouring hot ashes into them, and shaking them about.

The foreigners made a remark, in which Tom caught something like the word "ingenious."

"Call it what you please," he said; "but do you think to put on yours again, you will do the like. Oh lord, the letter!" with which exclamation he sprung at his doublet, which lay on the floor, exuding several small rills, and drew forth that missive in a decidedly pulpy condition.

Dick Earle had been short of paper. It was only half a sheet folded, and it opened of itself as Tom placed it—address uppermost, as luck would have it—to dry on the hearth. This was an operation which

required some care and time; and he did not perceive that the tall man with the scar on his cheek was stooping over him the while. When the paper was dry, and he had refolded it, he saw that his fellow guests had retired to the other end of the room, and were deep in conversation. Well, they were dry by this time, and the fire was perhaps oppressively hot. Tom himself was glad to move away when the welcome word *supper* was pronounced. Alas! it was not his supper, he was told. First come, first serve, was the rule of that house. The drawer was not sure that they *could* get two suppers; whereupon the elder of the travellers laughed at Tom's look of dismay, and courteously invited him to join them at their repast.

They were very hospitable—particularly with the wine, which the tall man pressed on Tom with many words and gestures of good-will; but Tom would none of it.

"Draw me a stoup of ale," he said, and threw down his broad piece like a prince.

"Thou hast a long ride yet before thee to Manchester," observed the spokesman.

"Anon!" said Tom.

"And it is ill-weather for thy journey."

"The rain is all but over now."

"Frankly, thou bearest a letter for Signor Porras."

"Frankly; thou art a knave to know it," cried Tom, starting up.

"Tut, tut! I saw but the superscription, and no one had a better right to read it, for I am the person to whom it is addressed."

"Thou art of a truth, Signor Vincenti Porras?"

"In good sooth I am. This gentleman will tell thee so."

The other nodded, and said, "yaes, yaes."

"Hum! And thy name is——?"

"Marco."

"There! Thou seest thou canst finish thy errand here."

"By delivering thee this letter?"

"Precisely."

"Vastly good!" said Tom, reseating himself, and making a second onslaught upon the pastry. "Vastly good! Now listen, worthy Signor Vincenti Porras, and

thou, worshipful Master Marco Something—quit thy scowling, for 'twill naught avail. When the gentleman who wrote this letter gave it into my hands, he read to me the superscription—as thou callest it—and if I recollect aright, it was for Signor Vincenti Porras, at the Golden Boar, in Deansgate."

"That is precisely where I lodge."

"Then when I see thee *at* the Golden Boar in Deansgate, thou shalt have thy letter, but not an hour before," and he raised his stoup of ale to his lips, and saw the bottom of it before he put it down.

The tall man muttered something which, to judge by the expression of his eyes, was not favorable to Tom; but the other laid his hand upon his sleeve and checked him.

"Thou art a trusty youth," he said warmly. "I like thee the better for thy refusal. We will ride on together in the morning, and thou shalt not relinquish thy charge till thou art certain that it falls into the right hands. Mayhap it doth not press."

"Don't it!" thought Tom; and then an idea flashed into his head.

"But thou mayest at least tell me who sent thee?" insinuated Signor Porras.

"Richard Earle, of London."

"I know him not."

"Mayhap. He wrote not for himself, but his companion, a young gentleman of Italy, who had met with a sore mischance."

"Ha! How so?"

"His horse fell, and rolled over him. They were on their way to Manchester, and sent me on to thee—if, indeed, thou art this Signor Porras—for help."

The two foreigners exchanged rapid glances. Marco, who did not understand a word of what was passing, seemed impatient.

"I will tell thee all presently," the other whispered in Italian. "Leave him to me."

"Poor gentleman! A countryman, I dare say, who had heard of me. Canst describe him?"

"A fair man, with large grey eyes; well-favored, too, when well, I'll be sworn, but fearsomely pale when I saw him."

"Did this—I forget me his name—he who wrote, call him by his name?"

"Well, yes, he did."

"What was it?"

"I cannot rightly say; they spoke Italian, I suppose. Something like *Illust—Illustriss*. I know not.

"*Illustrissimo*?"

"That was it. *Illustrissimo*."

"Now, bethink thee, good youth, were it not a charity to give me that letter, so that I may go at once to the aid of the poor gentleman?"

"No," said Tom, stoutly, "I have told thee enough, an thou art *really* the man he seeks, to send thee to his side. If after this thou goest not, 'tis proof thou art not Signor Vincenti Porras, and that I must seek him in Manchester. If I give him the letter, mused cunning Tom, "he might mistrust it and me."

"Wilt guide us back to where he is?" Porras asked, after a pause.

"An you will."

"Good; we will start at daybreak."

"Softly, softly, good signor. I did not tell thee that my only business was to deliver that letter; but if thou wilt wait here till my return——"

Porras interrupted him with a gesture of impatience.

"Where did you leave these travellers?" he asked.

Tom told him, and was very particular in indicating the road. Then he went out again to the stable, to see if "*Hafid*" were all right, and get to his holsters.

"I tell thee, cousin," said Marco, when they were alone, and Tom's story had been translated, "I would have had that letter, though it cost him a stab. Leave him to me."

"Of what avail is the paper when we know its contents?"

"There may be more than he says; there may be some trick."

"No," said the other, after a pause; "the boy is honest. There is no trick. If there were, he would have given me the letter."

"It may not be our kinsman who is hurt, after all."

"Bah! Who else can it be? Who else coming from abroad knows me as Vincenti Porras? The guide, or whatever the man who writes may be, called him 'Illustrissimo,' which yon simpleton took to be his name. 'Tis Cosmo de Ribolini—none other."

"Then the end is nearer than we thought."

"Much nearer."

He of the addle pate arrived with the baggage soon after midnight, and Tom, who was sleeping with one eye open, heard the orders he received. He was to hire fresh horses to go *back* in the morning and find a doctor to bear his masters company.

"That settles it," said Tom to himself; and taking a long nail, which he had sharpened, from his pocket, he threw it out of the window. "A good twelve hours lost, and no harm done to any dumb beast."

Poor, faithful Tom! He little thought that what he had done might *gain* them two days.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW TOM STEVENS LIED FOR HIS MASTER.

TOM STEVENS had only once accompanied his master to Manchester, and consequently knew not exactly the way to his house. Hafid was wiser, and took him thither straight.

"Mother of mercies!" cried Dame Martha, as she saw them enter the yard. "*Another!*" and on his own horse too!"

Then she volunteered the information that Master Desmond was not in town. She could not say where he had gone, or when he would return. It was no use asking any questions; she knew nothing.

All this very volubly, in a half-frightened, half-defiant tone, and without the least provocation from Tom.

"Who asked for Master Desmond?" he said, as he dismounted. "An' he hath gone to the devil, and means to stay, it is no business of mine, I seek one Gregory Denys."

"My son!" moaned the good dame, crossing herself. "Oh, what hath he done?"

"Nay, I am not his godfather," replied pert Tom Stevens, loosing Hafid's girths. "I pray thee send him hither, if he be in the house."

The doors of the old brew-house opened as he spoke, and Gregory himself appeared, hammer in hand as usual. His employer had left him some heavy work to finish, and he was busy.

"Who asks for me?"

"I do—if thou art Gregory Denys."

"I know thee not," said the smith. Since that affair of the purse, he had grown suspicious of strangers.

"Hist!" Tom whispered, lowering his head, and putting "Hafid" between them and Dame Martha, who stood on the steps leading into the house, in an agony of suspense. "Hist!" come nearer. Dost know this horse?"

"'Tis my master's."

"And this ring?"

"His also."

"Come with me to the stable, and I will show thee more. Why, man," he cried aloud, "must this good nag have no corn after his journey, or shall I take him to an inn?"

"Follow me," said the smith. "Get thee in, mother, I will join thee anon. Now," turning upon Tom, as soon as the stable-door had closed behind them, "thy will with me."

But Tom, true to his teaching, rubbed down "Hafid" and fed him before he would say a word. This done—he sat him down upon the corn bin, and began.

"Thou hast recognised thy master's ring. Good! It was his token for thee to obey his orders by my mouth."

"And they are?"

"To take horse and follow me."

"But——"

"But me no buts. Master Desmond is in some strait. Nay, I know not what; I did but guess by his face that there is something amiss. Mayhap I am wrong to say as much, but he is my master as well as thine, and I love him."

"I would lay down my life to serve him."

"Good again. Then get thee a horse, and prepare to follow me, as soon as 'Hafid' has rested."

"Whither, boy, whither? I must——"

"Hadst thou as much trust in him as he has in thee, thou wouldst not ask 'whither.' 'Get thee to Manchester, see Gregory Denys, give him this ring, and bid him take horse and follow thee.' Those were his words. An' thou hadst come with such to me, I would have asked no *whither*."

"Master Desmond has enemies," mused the half-convinced smith.

"The more reason that his friends should be true."

"I know my duty, and will not be taught by thee, thou jackanapes!"

"Then do it," said Tom, "and no more words about it."

"Let me see that ring again."

"Take it and the money, too. Thou art the elder, and 'tis meet thou shouldst bear the purse. Good Master Gregory, forgive me if I have said ought to offend thee, but do thy duty, and," he added more seriously, "hold thy tongue, as he bade me do."

"What *can* I say, except that I am going to my master."

"Thou must not say even so much."

"If I follow thee, who comest from him, the folk will know."

"Leave that to me. Knowest thou the Golden Bear, in Deansgate?"

"Aye."

"Then lead me there."

"What is thy name?"

"Tom Stevens."

"How long hast served my master!"

"Nine years."

"Then give me thy hand, Tom Stevens. Thou art a smart youth, and *must* be loyal."

They went together to the Golden Boar, and mine host's first words as Tom asked for Signor Porras, were almost an echo of Dame Martha's greeting,—

"What! *Another*. Gramercy! this Signor must be a great man to have two messengers after him in one day. Art also from London?"

"Anon!" said Tom, looking as stupid as he could.

"He was at our house an hour ago, with a letter for Master Desmond," Gregory whispered.

"In God's name, who?"

"Why, the other messenger to be sure."

"Oh, there is another messenger! Came he through Macclesfield?" asked Tom:

"Here he is, to answer for himself," said Gregory; "dost know him?"

"No. Give you good day, fair gentleman," said Tom, bowing politely to the person indicated. "Thou also it would seem, have business with Signor Porras?"

We have met that other messenger before. It was no other than John Eastman who joined them in the porch, sent by mine host to see his fellow courier.

The despatch which missed Cosmo de Ribolini by a few hours at Naples, missed Signor Pietri by four days in London. It was sent under cover to Martin Earle, with the request that he would deliver or forward it at once, as it was of the last importance. Cosmo had been markedly reticent about his business in Manchester, and so the goldsmith did not know where to send the packet: "But," reasoned he, "John can find Dick—I warrant me ruffling Dick will make himself known—and he found, the rest is easy."

So the epistle—sealed with the Ribolini seal, and directed to the new head of the family with all his titles—was again put under cover, addressed to plain Signor Pietri, and, accompanied with a note to Hugh Desmond, begging him to aid in the search, was given to John Eastman with orders to ride haste, post haste, to Lancashire. And so he did.

Now, Signor Pietri had been as good as his word, when he told Dick that he would not hurry, and that they would have a pleasant journey. The more the young noble thought about his mission the less he liked it. He was fain to put off the meeting with his grim kinsman as long as possible. He had a sort of vague hope something might occur to render his interposition unnecessary. De La Torre might become impatient, and act alone. He would give him every chance. So he went out of his way to see Oxford, and wasted two days at Warwick. Dick was delighted

with such rambling, and you may be sure no remonstrance at the delay came from him. So John Eastman—riding straight and fast, would have all but overtaken them, even if that accident had not happened.

He went first to Desmond's house, as instructed, for the expected assistance. Hence Dame Martha's exclamation. Then he rode hither and thither, asking for Dick, who was not known, and next for Signor Pietri, and was told at last that there were two foreigners staying at the Golden Boar, one of whom was called Porras, not Pietri; but it might be the same—these folk had so many names. If it were not, still he would surely know where the other could be found. Then, as now, it was a maxim with the British mind, that all foreigners must be acquainted with each other. Away went John to the Golden Boar, and asked for Signor Porras. Hence the comment of mine host upon the importance of that visitor, when Tom Stevens made the same demand an hour later.

Very little passed in the town of any import which did not reach the ear of Master Willford, the witch-finder, and so long before sundown he learned that two horsemen had arrived, each with messages for Hugh Desmond and Signor Porras—at least, both of them had called at Desmond's house.

We left Tom Stevens politely applying the pump to the first arrived courier, with his "Thou, also, it seems, have business with Signor Porras?"

"Simply to find another person," John replied.

"His companion?" suggested Tom.

"I know not if he be his companion or no. He I seek is named Pietri, an Italian, fair and haughty in his way, whose guide is my fellow-prentice."

"From London?" Tom asked, quickly.

"Aye, from London."

"Why, of course," said Tom, after a little consideration.

"Richard Earle?"

"Thou hast seen him. He is here," cried John, flushing with pleasure. "Lead me to him."

"That were not easy," Tom laughed. "He is many a good league away."

"But on his road hither?"

"Oh, dear, no," said unblushing Tom. "Let me get my dinner, and I will tell thee all about him, and thy Signor Porras too."

Gregory plucked his sleeve. "Anon, anon," he said, impatiently shaking himself free. "If thou canst talk on an empty stomach, that cannot I. The gentleman will wait till I have refreshed myself; wilt not, fair sir?"

But John Eastman had turned aside cursing his ill luck. Many a good league away, and not coming to Manchester! John had had quite enough of the saddle already.

"Take me to some place where we can talk apart," Tom whispered Denys as they passed into the street again, having ascertained that dinner would be served in half an hour. "I would keep out of yon fellow's way until I have made up my plans about him."

"Leave him alone—what is he to thee?" was the smith's gruff reply. "Is this holding thy tongue as our master bade thee?"

"Thou shalt judge anon," said Tom.

They walked down to the river—it was a bright stream then, with banks lined with rushes, and spangled with the blue forget-me-not. Passing the Castle Field, where the Medlock and Tweed join their waters, they were soon out of the reach of interruption, and Tom narrated how Hugh Desmond had spoken of those foreigners, one of whom had turned out to be Signor Porras, and what had passed to detain them.

"And now," quoth Tom, "we must get that packet for Signor Pietri, who is mixed up with them for a surety in some way, else they had not gone back to assist him."

"If they be our master's foes, how comes it that their messenger came to him for help?"

"That is what disturbs me. That is why I say I must get that packet. If it bode our master good, 'tis well he should have it quickly, and I may not say where he has gone. If it bode him ill, 'tis well all the same that its purport should be known to him. Can'st read?"

"Not I."

"Nor I," and the pair laughed.

"Thou hast a head, Master Tom," said the smith, gazing with admiration into the stripling's excited face.

"And thou a mighty arm, Master Denys. But I would that one of us could read. Dost think *he* can?"

"The fellow yonder?" jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

Tom nodded an affirmative.

"God knows. He is from London," said the smith.

"Can all Londoners read?"

"Mayhap."

"I'll try him, anyway," mused Tom.

"But the packet is sealed—I saw it. He would not dare open it, unless——"

"I am not thinking of the packet," said Tom. "Methinks I see a way. Hark ye, Gregory: get thee a horse, and join me in two hours at the hotel with 'Hafid.' Stand to whatever I say. I'll have that packet."

Tom dined, and did full justice to the cheer set before him. John Eastman had become anxious to learn more about Dick, and when they were alone came back to the subject.

"Well," said Tom, crossing his legs and looking mighty wise, "there is a good deal of mystery about this Signor Pietri into which it were not good for us to pry too closely, Master—Master——"

"Eastman is my name."

"I had forgotten for the moment. We riders, good Master Eastman, have to do what we are bid, and ask no questions."

John did not quite like being taken for a rider, but he let it pass.

"I have a letter for thee."

"Ha! give it, then."

"Canst read?"

"Aye; where is the letter?"

Tom, expecting a contrary answer, had already put his hand in his pocket and half drawn forth that damaged epistle which was to be delivered to Signor Porras at the Golden Boar. It was too late to retract now, so he handed it.

"'Tis Dick's own writing!" exclaimed the 'prentice, "but in Italian. How comes that?"

Tom was relieved. "How should I know?" he said.

"Master rider," rejoined the other, severely. "I know not what is said herein, but the character is in English, and it is addressed to Signor Porras. Thou didst say just now that it was for me."

"Tut! it *is* for thee, though it bear not thy name. Listen. It is writ, as thou knowest, by thy friend, Richard Earle, who is travelling with this Signor Pietri. Dost admit that?"

"I do."

"Well, so far. This Signor Pietri has business with Signor Porras, and was journeying hither to join him."

"That may be so."

"It is so. Signor Pietri hurt his hand at—at—on the way, and I was sent on to call his friends to him where he was. I overtook him, and discharged my mission."

"How then hast the letter?"

"Patience," said Tom, with a deprecating smile. "Thou shalt be satisfied. What didst learn here respecting Signor Porras?"

"That he had ridden south, and would return in a week, or less."

"To wait for Signor Pietri?"

"I suppose so."

"Then having already met him, he will not return."

"How know you that?"

"Because he told me," replied Tom, with well-feigned impatience. "I left him going where his friend was, and he said, 'Hie thee on to Manchester all the same, and if there be any packet at my lodgings for me or Signor Pietri, bring it back.' Said I, 'Give me some warrant, for they will not credit a simple lad such as I am.' 'There is no time to write,' said he, 'but take this ring—stay, better still, take this letter thou has brought me; it will explain why I turn back, and be thy warrant. But be careful. Bring on the packet *thyself*, for—well, I may not tell thee what else he said. I told you just now there are mysteries about this Signor,' said the accomplished young liar, lowering his voice into a whisper.

"It might be another Popish plot," mused the other.

"It might, indeed; in good sooth, it *might!*"

"In which an honest man would risk his head before he knew where he really was."

"That's the danger," Tom rejoined, decisively.

"And Dick is with them. Poor, dear, trusting Dick! By heaven!" cried John Eastman, bringing his fist down upon the table with a crash, "I *will* go and warn Dick!"

Now this was by no means what Tom was leading up to. He wanted to frighten Dick's friend out of the packet, and was considerably taken aback by this outburst of affection; but as his auditor got up and began to pace the room in his excitement, he had time to think. He thrust his hands into his pockets, stretched out his legs, and observed, in a careless tone—

"Oh, *he* is safe."

"Safe! How can he be safe in the company of those whom thou hast admitted may be traitors?"

"Who said he was in their company?"

"Why, thou thyself."

"Pshaw! Is this Dick of thine a fool?"

"I will break the pate of any that say so," cried John, striding up to him.

"Then break not mine," laughed Tom.

"I hold him to be a wise man for quitting them as he did."

"He has quitted them?" cried the other, aghast.

"Good Master Eastman," said our romancer, "did I not tell thee that Signor Pietri had sent me for his friends, and that those friends had gone to him?"

"Thou didst, but——"

"Well, they had then no need of thy Dick, or he of them. Ah! it is a fine thing to be independent," Tom sighed. "I marvel that so spirited a blade put up with such services as long as he did."

"Gone back to London!" mused John Eastman.

"Not to play the lacquey again, I'll warrant," said Tom.

"He never played the lacquey," cried the other, indignantly.

"As you will. All I can say is, that when I saw them together, this fine Signor

did not do a thing for himself; it was 'bring me this,' and 'do that.'"

All of which was, for once, the truth. The poor gentleman could not move hand or foot; but it gave honest John the idea that his friend was being put upon, and removed the last scruple from his mind.

"To the devil with him and his packet!" he shouted, flinging it on the table. "I'll be no lacquey!"

Tom's eyes devoured the letter now within reach of his hand, but he dared not show his eagerness.

"A poor lad like me has no choice," he said sadly. "I must fetch and carry like a dog, and for less than a dog's fee. Dogs get a kind word and a pat of the hand sometimes. I don't. Well, I'll carry it. Get thee back to thy home, good Master Eastman, and let this be a warning to thee; carry no more letters for foreigners who wander about the country and may not tell their business, an' you value your neck."

With which sage advice Tom pocketed the letter, and strolled out into the street.

In due time Gregory Denys appeared mounted, and leading Hafid.

"Well," whispered the smith, as Tom sprang into his saddle, "what of the letter?"

"I've got it."

"By fair means?"

"I lied for it. The Lord help me! If I am to be damned for lying for my master, I am a lost soul this day! *But I've got the packet!*"

CHAPTER X.

"FORGIVE HIM THIS TIME."

HUGH DESMOND rose soon after Tom Steven's departure, and walked into Stafford to buy horses (hired beasts might be traced) for the flitting. As he rode back on one of his purchases, leading the other, he was surprised to see several persons collected round his door. There was a woman on a donkey, and four men standing by a sort of a litter made of a gate and green boughs. His heart, full of anxiety and suspicion, gave a bound as he dashed

forward into their midst, and it was some time before he could listen patiently to Dick Earle's explanation.

We know all that had happened up to the arrival of the woman at the road-side hovel, so there is no need to repeat it. In five minutes Dick had got more out of the hoveller's wife than he would have obtained in a life-time from that hermit.

Why, of course there was a house near!—the house of Master Desmond, a good gentleman and a kind; an excellent leech to boot. Had he not given her some bitter stuff which had taken the "shakes" out of her last Martinmas? Why did not her good man send them to Master Desmond?

Her good man admitted that he *had* thought of Master Desmond. This was when that stray spark of intelligence flickered, as already narrated; but with this thought came the idea that perchance the gentleman might die, and so save trouble. He did not say "and so save trouble," but that was what he meant.

So they got help, made a litter, and here they were.

"Thou wilt surely not deny help and hospitality to one who spoke thee so fairly," said Dick when, his story ended, Hugh Desmond made no reply, but stood gazing moodily upon the ground.

Common humanity bade him receive the sufferer, and, on the other hand, the charity which begins at home urged that nothing should be allowed to derange his plans for flight. He thought only of his flight just then. No suspicion that the man in the litter could be in any way connected with his enemies occurred to him. When they had met at Stafford he was presented as a gentleman going on business to the North, and Dick said nothing now about that message to Manchester,—not because he had anything to conceal, but simply for the reason that he saw no necessity to mention it.

Under any other circumstances, Hugh Desmond's house, and all the healing skill he possessed, would have been cordially at the sufferer's service. He was a friend of Bosco's, and of Martin Earle. He had, as Dick pleaded, spoken him (Desmond)

"fairly." Above all, his anxious, pain-wrung face pleaded for him.

"There is time yet," mused Hugh, "to see to his hurts and bestow him comfortably. Better here than in yon hovel. Yes, he would take him in."

He strode up to the door and knocked.

"'Tis no use," said Dick; "we have been knocking for half an hour in vain. Art alone here, Master Desmond?"

In a moment he had his answer. There is knocking and knocking. At the master's first tap the bolts were drawn and the passage free. He laid his finger on his lip, and made a sign to Sweetheart, who instantly retired.

Then Cosmo de Ribolini—known to all present, but one, as plain Signor Pietri, and unknown by that one to have any connection with his hostess—was carried carefully to the room of the sister who had "disgraced" her family, was placed upon her own bed, and the man whom he had crossed the seas to kill without pity or defence, tended his hurts with a gentle hand.

A collar-bone and three ribs were broken, and there was what an engraver might call "a beautifully sharp impression" of a demi-pique saddle on his left side. What internal injury there might be, Hugh Desmond could not tell. He hoped for the best as the patient breathed freely, and there was no spitting of blood; but he was badly bruised and shaken in that *mauvais cinq minutes* he had passed between the hard ground and a struggling horse, as may well be imagined. It was like heaven to the poor fellow to have his clothes cut off, and to be stretched on that cool, soft couch. Some unguent which Desmond applied to his side soon took the sting out. Hitherto he had shrank from the lightest touch—now he submitted himself like a weary child to those strong but gentle hands.

Sweetheart remained in the adjoining apartment, full of wonder. It was part of her love-creed that Hugh Desmond could do no wrong; but women are quick to detect inconsistencies, and could not help contrasting his teaching with his practice. Why, after that episode of the beggar, should he let his sympathy get the better

of his prudence, and admit a stranger who spoke Italian into their very house? How did she know who spoke Italian? Well, the wainscoting which divided the two rooms had a crack in it, and she was a daughter of Eve. She peeped, and was rewarded by a full view of her husband, and of part of a shoulder and some hair belonging to the man on the bed. Then she tried a different sense, and clapped one of her pretty ears to the fissure.

"I have seen our hostess," Dick observed, as he resumed his seat by Signor Pietri's side, after the mid-day meal.

"He is married, then? Aye, I remember now."

"And has two sweet children—a boy who has just recovered from the fever, and a girl the very image of her mother. Most illustrious, I would thou could'st see the lady."

"*E' bella?*"

"If thou wert to ask me that in English, saying, 'is she beautiful?' I would say aye. Our word 'beautiful' fits her. Her face, her form, her voice, her smile, her movements, are full of beauty; and there is a world of it in her love for Desmond. She eyes him like a dog."

"Fie! Oh, for shame! to liken such a lady to a dog," said the gallant, indignantly.

"I said she eyed him like a dog, and if thou cans't find me ought more full of tenderness and trust than the gaze of a faithful hound, I will take thy simile."

"Say, then, like a loving woman."

"She is a loving woman. That were no simile."

"Have thy way," laughed the other (he could laugh now). And the child is like her?"

"As bud and flower."

"Poetical! Must I warn our good host to guard well his flower, master poet?"

"An' thou wouldst insult him—and me—thou cans't," said Dick.

"Nay, I did but jest. Right glad am I that he is so happy. He deserves to be so, Dick; 'tis a noble soul. Tell me more of the lady. Is she dark or fair?"

"Dark, with lustrous violet eyes."

"That is not an English type."

"It is somewhat rare here, but in Ireland, they say, it is common."

"She is Irish, then?" Cosmo asked this with surprise.

Irish and *Savage* were synonymous terms in those *good old days*, and so continued to be in times setting up to be wiser, with results which are not yet removed.

"No," Dick replied, "she is a foreigner."

"Indeed! Of what country?"

"I know not. She speaks our tongue fluently, but with just a little accent."

"Think you that my being here discommodes her?"

Dick looked round the room, which afforded several distinct proofs of female occupancy. His meaning was quickly caught.

"I pray thee, hie to Master Desmond, and beg him to have me moved. Any chamber will do for me. I am much better now. I think I could walk," said Cosmo. But his first effort to show his strength was a dismal failure, and he sank back exhausted with the effort. Dick, frightened at the pallor which came over his face, did hie to Master Desmond, who promptly appeared, and having chided his patient for disobeying orders to remain perfectly still, was pressed by him to infringe them himself, by acceding to his request for removal.

"It must not be," he replied decisively. "Thou art not intruding; thou must not stir: but I will be frank with thee. Hadst thou not been brought here, I and mine would have left this house to-day. We *must* leave at the latest to-morrow. This is why (to Dick) I hesitated, and doubtless thou didst think me churlish, at the gate. We must leave thee, Signor. Trust me, 'tis a matter of life and death; but my house, and all it contains, are at thy service, and I will send a good and trusty leech to tend thee. Rest, methinks, is the only medicine thou needest. Tell me thou dost not hold me wanting in hospitality. Indeed, indeed, I must go."

He was so earnest, that he heard not the patter of little feet upon the floor, or felt that a little warm hand was slipped in his. Children are curious animals; and

Miss Mary had been burning for hours for a peep at the "poor gentleman." She had it now. She stood, finger on lip, by the bed-side, with that expression half of fear, half of pity, which the presence of suffering will bring into the face of a child. She saw the "poor gentleman" now, and he saw her before her father had well ended his appeal.

"Thy child?" cried Cosmo, with a start; and the words on his tongue for reply to that appeal clean left him.

"Mary, dear, how camest thou here? Go to thy—go—" Desmond began.

"Oh, I pray thee, let her stay," interrupted Cosmo, eagerly, and trying to stretch a hand towards her. "Thy child! How strange. Wilt kiss me, little one?"

She looked up into her father's face, saw no refusal there, and kissed the flushed cheeks on the pillow.

"Don't cry," she said, "you will be better soon; papa said so."

Ah, the sweet faith of childhood! *Papa said so*, and therefore it must be true. By this time Dick had retired to let them have their talk out alone.

"Has she hurt thee?" said Desmond, noticing that the eyes, still fixed upon his child, were full of tears.

"Hurt me! oh, no! These" (brushing away the drops upon his cheek)—"are not for pain—not for the pain that thou canst cure. No, little one, you hurt me not. Tell her, I pray thee, that she hurt me not, but the touch of her innocent lips went to my heart. Years ago there was one so like her, that—that I loved dearly, Master Desmond, and she is lost to me." He had got out a hand now, and placed it lovingly on little Mary's head.

"Thy sister?" Desmond asked, with an interest which he could not account for or restrain.

"My only sister; the only one of my kin, except my poor mother, who understood and loved me. I was a wayward youth, rash, and thoughtless; and my father—a stern man—went not the right way with me. She, my little sister, was the angel in the house, the peace-maker, the soother of my rebellious thoughts, my counsellor, my *friend*."

"And she is dead?"

"Worse than dead," Cosmo replied, bitterly, "*disgraced*."

"Not so," said a calm voice; "not disgraced, Cosmo de Ribolini, for **THIS IS MY HUSBAND.**"

If you have not forgotten the crack in the wainscot, you know who was the speaker. She had missed little Mary, and to her dismay found that the child had followed her to the sick-room, but why did he keep her there? She looked, and saw. She saw the *soi disant* Signor Pietri raise his face to be kissed, and knew him for her brother. Oh, how her heart yearned to him as he spoke of her so lovingly! What a struggle she had to refrain from rushing into the room and flinging herself on her knees by his side. Her own brother! her darling, handsome Cosmo! crushed, perhaps maimed for life! perhaps dying! Her brother kissing her child for love of her, and recalling so tenderly those old days when she had stood between him and their grim father's wrath. But that one word, "*disgraced*," dried up her tears and stopped the passionate beating of her heart. Disgraced! should *any* lips speak that word of her in the presence of the husband she idolized? Her southern blood rebelled against the insult—to *him*. Pride banished fear. As an empress advancing to claim her crown on the day of coronation, she came before them. She wound a white arm around Hugh Desmond's neck, and calmly uttered these memorable words: "**NOT DISGRACED, COSMO DE RIBOLINI, FOR THIS IS MY HUSBAND!**"

"Cosmo de Ribolini!" cried Desmond, in a voice of anguish; "then we are lost!"

"I see," said his wife, calmly as ever. "Thou bearest the message those men expected. Our death-warrant, Cosmo."

He had fallen back upon his pillows pale as ashes. He moved his lips, but no sound came.

"And thou art come here like a spy, under the pretence——"

"Hush!" whispered Hugh. "Be just; 'tis no pretence."

Cosmo gave him a look of gratitude. Could this woman, stern as a Pythoness, under whose piercing gaze he quailed, be

his gentle sister, or the timid, lovable creature described by Richard Earle?

"I am glad of that," she said, "I know our race is cruel; I am glad we have escaped that meaner vileness. Well, you have found us. Is the man below thy comrade? Is he thy hired bravo? our executioner? Speak, why do you not reply?"

The child, who understood not one word that was said, and, child-like, thought that she must have done something wrong, clung to her mother, and hid her little face in her robe. Then it began to dawn upon her that the sick gentleman must have been naughty. She edged her way shyly to the bed, and taking the hand which lay spent and trembling on the coverlet, looking up into her mother's face, said pleadingly—

"Forgive him this time! Oh, do!"

He caught her to his bosom with a low, passionate sob, and murmured—

"Little Maria! little Maria!"

In an instant his sister was on her knees by his side, the now frightened child between them.

"Oh, forgive me!" she cried. "It cannot, *cannot* be! Oh, my brother! tell me there is no bond between you and those murderers? Tell me you will protect my husband?"

"As God is my Judge, Maria," he replied, "I did not know that Master Desmond was thy husband; I did know that ye lived here. But I am awaited in Manchester, and I am the bearer of what was intended to be the death warrant of the man with whom thou didst fly from thy home, and of thy boy!"

She gave a piercing cry, and started up.

You who are mothers and read this, know whither her heart flew—whither her faltering steps were about to take her. Her impulse was to rush to the cot where she had left little Hugh, to clasp him in her arms, to make her bosom his shield, to die for him or with him. Why, even now, the "man below," about whom Cosmo had not replied, might have done his deadly errand! But as she rose her brother caught her robe, and whispered—

"I said 'intended.'"

"Not by thee?"

"God help me! I cannot do it."

The beautiful, terror-stricken face sank on his hand, which she covered with kisses and tears.

Little Mary, who had been clinging to her mother, now turned again towards the "poor gentleman," put aside the dank locks which had fallen over his forehead with her chubby fingers, and nodding wisely at her father, said—

"He's good now."

All this time Hugh Desmond had stood by with folded arms, and a tempest in his mind which crushed or scattered thought. With amazement he saw the change that came over his gentle, timid Maria. With horror he listened to Cosmo's avowal of his mission, and caught no more than his wife had done the peculiar intonation which marked the word "intended."

Had the young Italian come there and said, "Master Desmond, my father has sent me to kill thee, but I will not do his cruel will; nay, more, I will protect you and yours against all who may seek to carry it out"—he would have heard him with the calm dignity born of honest pride and conscious innocence.

What had he done to be forgiven? Stolen a noble maiden—but from what? From the arms of a cold, worn-out voluptuary; from a life without a ray of love in it; from a compact whose main object was to join some patches of insensate earth together, though a tender heart were broken in the act! And for this he was doomed to death! He, a free-born Englishman, was to be assassinated upon his own native soil, because he had displeased the Ribolini! Small cause was there—viewing the position coolly, as we do now—for gratitude to the chief assassin because he was graciously pleased to sheathe his dagger.

But the end did not come in this wise; nor was it the result of any prayer for mercy, or appeal to brotherly affection. No; Desmond had not stooped an inch, until four baby words had laid the whole fabric of hatred and revenge in ruins. Four baby words—of which the object did not know the meaning, but accompanied

by a mute appeal, of which the purport could not be mistaken—turned the scale. “*Forgive him this time!*”

With other ways, but the same sweet, sad, pleading look, she whom he had called the angel of the house had stood between him and his angry parent in the days of his unloved youth. And this was her child, pleading for him—to her! This was the new peace-maker; and when her solemn decision, “He’s good now,” was lisped, there was no resisting. Pride, dignity, hard thoughts, fierce resolves, went by the board. Hugh Desmond broke down utterly, fell upon Sweetheart’s neck, and sobbed like a child.

“Master Desmond,” said Cosmo, “before I ask you to take my hand, and with it the pledge that no harm shall befall thee or thine through me, let me bare my heart, and show thee that I am sincere. Perchance thou knowest the traditions of our great houses?”

Hugh assented.

“Good! Brought up as we are, it is a hard thing to resist obedience to them; but I did resist. I fought against my father’s command; I fought against my own revengeful feelings, which prompted me to obey it. I knew not that my sister had mated with a good man; I knew not that she was happy. Sometimes I thought that *any* fate was better for her than that we had prepared; and again family pride—aye, and love for her—embittered my soul against the man who had saved her from it. He had robbed me of her sweet company, as I thought, for ever. Will you believe me, good Master Desmond, when I tell thee that all this time I, too, had resolved to do as this dear one did, and marry out of the narrow circle within which the laws of my race would confine my choice? Can I explain such inconsistency? Not I. But it will show how the first glimpse of thy happiness destroyed the last drop of poison in my mind. Had I but known thee as my sister’s husband, it would have passed away long ago. Will you take my hand now, Hugh Desmond?”

Need I tell what followed?

When Dick Earle returned, the spectacle presented fairly took his breath away.

Cosmo had asked to see little Hugh, and the two children were there, one on each side, with his two arms round them; Sweetheart, on a low stool at his side, had her face on the pillow touching his; and Hugh Desmond, with all the gloom out of him, sat looking on as though it were all right. What could this mean? Well, there was no need to tell him *all* it meant. The Viscount Cosmo de Ribolini was Sweetheart’s brother.

“Oh, indeed!” was all Dick could say; and having said it, the honest fellow made himself as scarce as the situation demanded.

So passed the happiest hours that three out of that five had spent for many a year. Night came on, and the children dropped off to sleep where they lay; but no one thought of moving. Sweetheart was the first to break the spell.

What were they to do? Should they all fly together? she whispered to her husband.

Hugh looked at Cosmo, and shook his head. There was cause for no hurry now, he thought. Vincenti de la Torre would keep to his plan, and wait. As soon as Cosmo was sufficiently recovered, he could join his vengeful kinsman, and detain him, on one pretext and another, until they (the Desmonds) were well out of danger.

“He” (meaning Vincenti) “cannot act alone,” he told her. “When he starts for Manchester, it will be quite time enough for us to leave this place.”

This was arranged just about the same time of night that Tom Stevens assured himself, with a chuckle of satisfaction, he had done his master good service by sending those two travellers back upon their road.

It was arranged to the satisfaction of all concerned. It was only when he awoke the next morning, with a clearer head, that Cosmo remembered what Dick Earle had done; and even then he did not know exactly what message had been sent. He only remembered that, whilst half stunned and wholly dazed by his crushing, Dick had asked where his friend lived in Manchester, and what was his name.

CHAPTER XI.

HOW THE SNARE WAS SET.

"FOOLED! I told thee it would be so," sneered the man called Marco, as his companion knocked in vain at the door of the hovel, which, thanks to Master Tom's precise instructions, they had found without difficulty. "Fooled! Did I not warn thee? By the Holy Virgin and all the saints, I will be even yet with that young villain! Oh, thou mayest knock till night. Who could live in such a place? We have had our ride for naught. A whole day lost! Body of Bacchus! If I only had him here! A knave, a lying knave!" And so *da capo*.

Marco was angry. He was angry to begin with, and he got more so as he went on. This was a mistake. The well-worn formula of mingled triumph and reproach, "*I told you so*," is effective in proportion to the calmness of its application. Storm it out with an angry stamp, and it isn't of much use. Go on nagging with it as Marco did, and its sting soon wears away. But if you desire to render an ordinary lord of the creation, who finds that you were right after all, frantic, or to send the average lady thereof, who finds that she was wrong, into a first-class rampage—be moderate. No loudness, no repetition. Assume a pensive expression of countenance, slightly raise your eyebrows, and with a slight wave of the hand, thumb outwards, turn from the fatal spot.

Vincenti de la Torre never got angry—or, at any rate, never showed anger. He gave Marco a look from under his evil brows, and half muttered, "Animal!" but he left off knocking, and looked around him.

The hovel did not stand on the road. The patch of turf in front of it was cut up by horses' hoofs, and there were chips of wood and green twigs freshly cut, and straw strewn about around the door. As this was only fastened by a rude bolt, he pushed it open, and found that the embers of the fire were cold; but as he looked more closely, something caught his eye amongst the straw in a corner—a horse-man's glove, and of Italian make! He

came out quite satisfied. He had not been fooled.

"Well, let us ride back," said Marco. "Why waste more time?"

"We have wasted none," replied his kinsman. "They have been here. See!" and he held up the glove.

"But have left, so what does it matter?" the other grumbled.

He did not like to be robbed of his "*I told you so*."

"They have not gone far. Dismount, good cousin, and be patient. I know what has passed, as though I had seen it with mine eyes."

"Indeed!" scoffed Marco. "Hast second sight?"

"It needs not that," replied Vincenti, quietly, "to read marks so plain. These foot-prints show that they have come here; this glove, that they stayed here; yon twigs were cut when a litter was made to carry our wounded kinsman to a neighboring house. In a short time some one will return to tell us the rest. Be patient!"

"A litter! How canst guess they made a litter? They might have been chopping fire-wood."

"One does not chop fire-wood from green boughs, to begin with. They made the litter yonder, and then dragged it to the door. Here are the marks! The straw was brought out to make a bed upon it. Look down towards the road, and you will see the tracks of the four persons who carried it."

"Thou art a wonderful man!" sighed Marco, now thoroughly subdued.

"Not so. Only a patient one. All comes with patience."

"As the tracks are so clear, why not follow them?"

"I thought of that," mused Vincenti; "but—as thou art mounted, ride on a little, and see how far they *are* clear, before we decide."

They were plain enough on the turf, which had soaked the rain of the previous night; but this had quite washed them out of the road. And so Marco reported upon his return. There was nothing to show which way the litter had gone.

"Better wait," said de la Torre.

And so they waited.

The hoveller, his wife, and the passer-by whom Dick Earle had pressed into the service, left Desmond's house with such a meal under their belts as had not warmed them for many a long day, and more broad pieces than they had earned in any year of their hard lives. The temptation to spend part of their wealth was strong, and so was the ale they had drunk. The men—as is not unusual under such circumstances—became sworn friends; and as the stranger was bound for Stafford, the hoveller, who had forgotten all about his "shakes," would not hear of his going alone; and the woman—partly with an eye to business connected with a certain pair of shoes and a 'kerchief for which her soul lusted, and partly to see that her lord did not spend too much upon himself—insisted upon joining the party.

They spent the night in town, and I regret to say that the same influence which had brought about that sudden friendship dissolved it.

The men got very drunk, and parted with mutual vows of vengeance. It was nigh noon on the following day before the hoveller had slept off the worst effects of his unwonted potations; and then they jogged back, to the great delight of the donkey, who had somehow been neglected during these festivities.

"More on 'em!" cried the hoveller, as they came in sight of their dwelling. "Lord, if there's another accident, we're made for life!"

But his amiable hopes were doomed to be disappointed. There was not another accident—only two gentlemen who wanted to know what had become of the victim to the original one. Two gentlemen, sent by the messenger who had passed, bound for Manchester, one of whom was struck dumb with surprise when told whither the object of his search had been carried. For once in his life Vincenti de la Torre was taken aback, and showed it.

"Is he dead?" cried Marco, in Italian.

"No," whispered the other in the same language, "and I shrewdly suspect not even hurt."

The speaker's thoughts ran with wile and treachery, just as naturally as his veins ran with blood. His creed was to disbelieve everything that appeared to be straightforward, and to seek hidden motives for the simplest act. In a moment it flashed upon him that he was being tricked. He asked if the foreign gentleman was aware to whose house he was being conveyed, and was told he did. More, that the guide knew Master Desmond well, and that they had all three met at Stafford. "The dotard has relented," muttered Vincenti, with a bitter curse. "Fool that I was to tell him so much! But how has he discovered the man of whom I wrote to be Desmond? Patience, patience! let me think." His thoughts ran thus: If the foreigner who had been taken to Desmond's house were Cosmo de Ribolini (and there could be little doubt of that), and he were really disabled, he would never have placed himself in the power of a man who had such reason to fear him, if he had been sent to execute the vengeance of his house. Was, then, the accident a myth, and his pretended hurt a pretext for obtaining an opportunity to carry out that vengeance single-handed? This might be. The cousin knew that his kinsman loved him not, and might be glad to rob him of his share in the long-cherished scheme of revenge. And yet how could he count against non-recognition by his sister before he could act? No; this would indicate a recklessness out of character with the other details of his plot. Was it possible that he did not know Desmond as his enemy, and was really hurt? Marco was right, after all, about the letter carried by Tom Stevens. They should have obtained that at all hazards. Well, Cosmo had sent for him, at any rate, which proved he had no intention of acting alone. It also seemed to disprove the idea that the vendetta had been abandoned.

Repugnant as it was to the thinker's nature to believe the facts presented to be true and straightforward, his reflections dislodged him from the false positions his own cunning had imagined. There was one thing, however, for which he could not account—that meeting at Stafford. He

had carefully cross-examined the hoveller's wife on this point. She, surprised at Master Desmond's apparent unwillingness to receive the sufferer, had noted well Dick Earle's half reproachful appeal, and repeated it *verbatim* — "THOU WILT SURELY NOT DENY HELP AND HOSPITALITY TO ONE WHO SPOKE THEE SO FAIRLY." Not a word had passed between them on that occasion. The guide must have referred to something which had been said at Stafford, and if there were any plot, the guide was in it. Musing upon this, the thinker was carried back over the old ground, to shift as before, and come round again to what he felt was the key of the situation — the fair words spoken at Stafford. Had they met there by design? Had they made friends? If so, why was Desmond unwilling to grant help and hospitality to the brother of his wife? If not, what could have been the cause of that fair speaking?

So pondered Vincenti de la Torre, puzzling his brains with their own craft. It may be good policy to set a thief to catch a thief, but put a trickster to unravel something that has not got a trick in it, and he makes a woful tangle.

Our trickster came to only one fixed conclusion, and that was, to communicate with Cosmo, and find in the answer a solution of the doubts which perplexed him. He did not tell Marco of those doubts, but only consulted with him as to how they were to get at their kinsman.

"If I only had my beggar's dress here!" sighed that worthy.

"'Twould not avail us. It never did beyond the outer gate. We must reach his chamber," said Vincenti.

"Or wait till he is well, and departs."

"Thou art improving, cousin mine. I have not preached patience to thee in vain. That we can do if all other plans fail; but methinks I see a speedier way." Then he turned back to the hovel, and called out the woman.

"It would seem that our friend is in good hands," he said, "and that we can do nothing for him, but would fain let him know we came to his assistance, as he asked us, and this without troubling good

Master Desmond, who has been disturbed enough. Thou hast been rewarded for thy pains?"

"Aye, and richly too," she replied, gratefully. "'Tis a kind gentleman, and a liberal."

"And thou wouldst gladly know if he be recovering from his hurts."

She assented.

"What more natural than thou shouldst show thy gratitude by going again to ask how he fares?"

"To bear thy message?"

"Well, not precisely," he said, opening his purse and producing a gold piece. "Interested as thou art in his welfare, thou mightest beg to see him. He could scarce refuse so small a favor! One does not thank with money alone. But verily, thou couldst bear my message at the same time, though it be not the cause of thine errand."

"Tut! tut!" she exclaimed; "speak out, good sir. I am to deliver thy message in secret—is that so?"

He looked her straight in the face for a moment, and then did as she bade him.

"Slip a paper I will give thee into his hand, and this" (giving her the gold) "is thy fee. Bring back his reply, and it shall be doubled."

"But I speak not his tongue, or he mine," said the woman.

"No matter; the reply will be 'yes' or 'no.'"

Then on a leaf from his tablet he wrote as follows:—

"Art thou my kinsman? Art really hurt? Hast thou orders from Mantua? I am near thee, with Marco, and will be in the wood behind the hovel thou hast left, every day at dusk till I see thee. Wilt meet me there as soon as thou art well enough? Is thy guide to be trusted? Answer by the one word, 'yes,' or 'no,' in English."

"VINCENTI."

He rolled the paper into a ball, and rehearsed the business of giving it with his messenger. She was an apt pupil. Then he, too, fell to wondering how so quick a woman could endure the life she led with

that sodden, sulky brute of a husband. Let him wonder. Perhaps it suited her; perhaps she had no choice; perhaps, with three gold pieces of her own, she may better herself. Who cares?

We know that in all classes, except, maybe, the very highest, the women are more intelligent, as a rule, than the men. It may have been so, also, in the good old days.

By this time Cosmo de Ribolini had learned from Dick all about the message sent to Manchester; but as neither of them knew that the servant of Desmond was its bearer, that Vincenti Porras and his companion were on the road, or that Tom Stevens had orders to provide an accident for delaying them, the information did not much derange the plan of the person most interested. True, as matters stood, his kinsman would not await him in Manchester. He would probably seek him at the hovel, and he was devising some scheme for detaining him there without needlessly alarming his hosts, when the arrival of the woman put quite a different complexion on the affair.

Poor loving Sweetheart, overflowing with gratitude to those who had been of service to her brother, at once acceded to her request to see and, as she said, thank him for his bounty—the good, grateful creature!

So the little ball of paper was slipped into Cosmo's hand, and he read the first words and the signature. His impulse was to send for Desmond, and have the messenger detained; but luckily (as it turned out) he checked himself. He made some excuse for getting Dick, who had come as interpreter, out of the room for a few minutes, and then, carefully perusing the missive, he gave the woman his reply.

Half-way on her return, she met her employer.

"Well," he asked, somewhat more eagerly than was his wont, "hast seen him?"

"Aye, master."

"Alone?"

The guide was with him when I went up; but he sent him away."

"And then you gave him the paper?"

"No, I had already done so."

"What said he? His reply, quick?"

"It was one word—'Yes!'"

"Art sure—quite sure?"

"Certain. He spoke quite plainly—'Yes.' I asked, to make certain, 'Yes?' and he said it again."

"Good! Thou hast done well. Here are thy two gold pieces. Be silent, and they will not be the last thou mayest earn."

"Good! The news was excellent—much better than he had hoped for. The man at Desmond's was truly Cosmo de Ribolini; he was hurt, he had news from Mantua, and would meet him (Vincenti) as he had arranged. All was well, or the guide would not have been sent away as he had been. That little detail was all convincing. *It showed that Cosmo did not trust those around him!* All was well.

Having thought it out in this wise, Vincenti sought further information from his messenger, and ascertained that, to the best of her belief, the guide had not seen Cosmo read the paper. After the first glance at it he (Cosmo) had crumpled it up again in his hand. Then he turned his back, and—as she supposed—read it. Yes, he was up, sitting in a chair. The lady had told her he was much better, and would be out in a day or two. Did they receive her kindly? Oh, yes, particularly the lady. And when she left, were they equally kind?

"Why not?" she asked, by way of reply. "I had done them no harm, had I?"

Signor Vincenti did not feel bound to answer this question. He had heard enough.

He explained the position—according to his view of it—to Marco.

"We will go back," he said, "to the place where we rested two nights ago. We shall be quieter and less observed there than at Stafford. Let me see. This is Friday. On Sunday, perchance, he will be able to sit his horse. On Sunday, then, I will return. What did I say to thee about patience! We have been anything but "fooled," my good Marco!"

CHAPTER XII.

HUGH DESMOND'S SHIELD.

COSMO DE RIBOLINI was, of course, unaware of the effect which his sending Dick out of the room had produced; nor did it occur to him that his kinsman, Vincenti de la Torre, could even suspect the possibility of a reconciliation between himself and Desmond.

You must remember that Desmond's name was not mentioned in that letter which his father had shown him at Mantua. The writer had only stated that he was on the tracks of "the man." So far as Cosmo knew, the clue had not yet been obtained. He had been told nothing about the beggar and the conversation overheard by Sweetheart.

Partly because Desmond did not wish to farther excite his patient, already deeply moved; partly because he saw no immediate necessity to tell him *all* the truth; and a good deal because they had been so happy together that night, that he had not the heart to tell it—he kept silence. He also was himself only half informed. Years of miserable anxiety and suspicion had made him taciturn, had shut him up in his own thoughts and his own plans. He asked no questions.

As for Sweetheart, she was so confident in her brother's ability to protect her and hers, that if there had been a score of Vincentis in the field, she would not have feared them.

The key to this unfortunate embroglio was the message sent by Tom Stevens. If Cosmo had only mentioned that, all would have come out; but Cosmo kept his own counsel. Not for an instant did he repent what he had done. He felt that he had done right, and was quiet, happy, and confident. He respected, almost loved his sister's husband. Not a hair of his, or his child's head should be hurt; but—here the Ribolini pride came in—they should be protected by *him*, Cosmo. That was *his* duty, *his* privilege—his alone, not to be shared by any one. Desmond was a tender spouse, a loving father, a brave and good man. His reward was that he might wed with a Ribolini and live; but meddle

in the Ribolini's affairs?—never! The stake to be played for was his life and that of his little son; but he could not be permitted to take any part in the game. This was to be played out in the family and by the family.

So Cosmo kept silent about the message to Manchester; kept silent about the return of Vincenti and Marco; kept silent about his appointment to meet them in the wood; kept silent about every topic connected with the past; and, to make up for such reticence, spoke so gaily of the future, that his hearers began to treat their danger as though it had existed only in some nightmare, from which they had happily awakened.

"When, thinkest thou, that I shall be able to resume my journey?" he asked Hugh Desmond, the morning after the delivery of Vincenti's message.

"In about a week."

"Oh! less than that. See, how well I can walk now."

"Thou hast no internal hurt, as I at first feared. 'Tis a simple case of bruising, which at thy age passes off quickly. Thou wilt know thyself when thy bones are fit for the saddle."

"Would it not be well for me to essay for a short distance a day or two before I make my final start, and so get some of the stiffness out of my limbs, and test my strength?"

"It would, indeed."

"Then I will try to-morrow," said Cosmo.

"I have need myself to ride abroad to-morrow," Desmond replied. "Thou canst bear me company part of the way."

"Nay, nay, brother mine," laughed the other, "not so. I am just a little proud of my horsemanship, and, with thy good leave, will be the sole witness of mine own awkwardness. I shall but take a short turn in the pleasant English lanes around thy dwelling. I shall go alone."

Thus did he provide for keeping his appointment with de la Torre.

Now Tom Stevens had left at daybreak on the previous Thursday, and would be at the mill with Gregory by some time on

Sunday. Desmond's original plan was to meet them there with Sweetheart and the children, to send Tom on in charge of the latter towards London, and double back with the young smith to meet, and, if possible, dispose of the enemy. The enemy, thanks to Cosmo, had been already disposed of. Cosmo had confirmed what he had whispered to Sweetheart on the evening of their reconciliation. Vincenti and Marco were at his orders. They could not act without him. "Thou art quite safe," he said; "leave all to me." This was not as satisfactory as it might be, but Desmond was proud too, and did not press the subject. Nevertheless, he determined not to leave it all to Cosmo. His kinsman might not obey him. The old scheme might have to be followed, after all.

So early on the Sunday morning he started on his mission, and towards the cool of the evening Cosmo de Ribolini went on his, making the same excuse to Dick, who had volunteered his company, that he had already given to Desmond. Sweetheart accompanied him to the gate. He stooped and kissed her; and although she was only his sister, the laws of the *haut école* had to be observed. He bared his head, spurred his steed, and departed with a caracole, which looked mighty pretty, but made his sore bones ache again. Accustomed to the shorter twilight of the South, he had miscalculated his time. The sun was still high when he reached the wood in the rear of the hovel. He dismounted, tied up his horse to a tree, and was by no means sorry to stretch himself upon the soft turf near its shade. He had not waited long before the sound of jingling bits and the crushing of brambles announced the approach of horsemen, but not by the road he had come. "Here they are," he said, half aloud, and mounted on a neighboring bank to get a better view of their approach. The foliage was so thick that he could not see them till they were close upon him, and then he knew that they were not those he expected. There were three riders instead of two, and the foremost was Hugh Desmond.

His first thought was that he had been dogged, that his host mistrusted him, and

was acting the spy; but the genuine start of astonishment with which the latter reined up, checked the indignant remonstrance which was rising to his lips.

Desmond, who was some twenty yards in advance of his followers, waved them back, and said in a low voice that trembled with emotion—

"Was it well, Signor de Ribolini, to conceal from me that thou hadst sent for those who compass my life?"

"Hast met them?" cried Cosmo, thrown off his guard.

"No; it is good for them that I have not. 'Twas mine own servant who delivered thy letter, and turned them back on the road. And thou art here to meet them?"

"I am."

"It was for this, then, that thou didst refuse my company. For *this*, the pretence of testing thy strength! Are all thy protestations of this order?"

"Good Master Desmond, bear with me," said Cosmo. "Trust me, I pray thee; I am acting for the best. This is my affair, not thine."

"Not mine!" cried Desmond, pale with suppressed anger. "Not mine, when it touches my life, the life of my son, and the happiness of my beloved wife! God's truth! not my affair! and the assassins around my dwelling, and in league with one who has passed in it as my friend! We are three to three, Cosmo de Ribolini now, but stood I here alone, this should show thee" (striking his sword hilt) "whose affair it is."

The rattle of steel brought the blood into the young Italian's face, but there was no time to quarrel. The others might appear at any moment.

"I swear to thee," he said, "by all that is most sacred, that I am thy true and loyal friend. If I have deceived thee in aught—have kept aught from thee, it was for thy good. I say again, this is my affair. For thy wife and children's sake leave it to me." Then he told him hurriedly why he had taken it upon himself, and what he proposed to do, concluding thus: "We have a wily adversary, good brother. He will not risk a personal en-

counter. If he did, and was slain, what then? Thy danger is but postponed, not removed, so long as my father is of the same mind. Vincenti's death at thy hand would only add intensity to the vendetta. Thou wouldst not be safe, and I less able to help thee. Leave it to me to meet guile with guile, and if the time should come when the knot must be cut with steel, my sword shall be out with thine. As a noble, as a knight, as a MAN, Hugh Desmond, I pledge thee my faith that I am true to thee."

"If thou art false there is no truth—none. God help me!" said Desmond, pressing his outstretched hand. "I have a packet for thee."

"For me?"

"'Tis addressed to Signor Pietri—the name thou didst assume. There was a messenger for thee at Manchester."

"Is he with thee here?"

"No. 'Tis too long a tale to tell thee now. Suffice it for the present that the packet has fallen into my hands. You see the seals are intact. The bearer was from Martin Earle, of London."

"Something for his nephew, doubtless," replied Cosmo, carelessly, as he thrust the letter in his belt. "I pray thee leave me now, and in an hour I will tell thee all. From this hour there shall be no secrets between us."

Another reassuring clasp of hands, and Hugh Desmond rode quietly away with his companions.

Twilight had now fairly set in, and yet no Vincenti at the rendezvous! He had named no particular spot in the wood. "Behind the hovel" were his words. Well, the wood was deeper than broad; he might be waiting further on. Cosmo was in the act of mounting to make a reconnaissance, when he thought of the letter, and half drew it from his belt. The outside cover was loose and a little torn. He could feel that there was a sealed inclosure. This satisfied him that Dick Earle must be the person most interested, or why had the goldsmith put on that outer sheet? He thrust it back again—he had something else to think of now—rode right through the wood, and had a

good look around him in the open. He saw no one.

But some one saw him.

Vincenti de la Torre and his faithful henchman had also started early; and when they came to an eminence known as Three Tree Hill, from which a clear view of the wood and the road which led to it from Desmond's house could be obtained, he halted, saying—

"Rest awhile; we are before our time. When he comes in sight—if he comes at all to-day—we can proceed."

But Cosmo was already at the place of meeting when he spoke. So they waited, and saw an arrival, for which they were unprepared, from an opposite direction. Three horsemen passed them in the valley below, and they recognized them all—the smith who had been accused of stealing Marco's purse at Manchester; the messenger who had overtaken them with Dick Earle's letter; and Hugh Desmond himself, mounted on the very horse that messenger had ridden from the hovel! And they all three went into the wood and stayed there.

Presently Cosmo rode out into the open, looked about him, and returned.

"The wood is full of them," whispered Marco.

"'Tis an ambushade!" muttered Vincenti, between his teeth.

His favorite word, "fooled," rose again to Marco's lips, but his companion looked so dangerous that he swallowed it. That person was, in good sooth, livid with rage. All his former fears came back upon him in a rush, intensified and cleared of doubt. Cosmo was in league with the enemy. The messenger he, Vincenti, had trusted, the woman he had employed, were in the plot! The reflection that pig-headed Marco was right, after all, and they *had* been fooled, almost maddened him. They *were* fooled—all but trapped. How many more men might there not be in ambush? It was a trap—a palpable trap!—but the snare was set in sight of the bird, and the bird was cunning!

Four to two were odds which it did not suit Signor Vincenti de la Torre to face.

They might be ten—twenty—to two for aught he could tell; for others might have entered the wood from the hovel side, where the road was low, and hidden by the trees.

It was some consolation, though a poor one, to think that he had not fallen into the trap, and with this he rode back the way he had come. If he had only waited ten minutes more, he would have seen three of the supposed ambush wending their way quietly along the higher part of the road towards Desmond's dwelling.

"What now, kinsman mine?" asked Marco, with just a tinge of triumph in his tone.

He got no answer; Vincenti was plunged in thought.

"How was the moon last night?" he asked suddenly, after they had ridden about a mile.

"There was hardly any. I was awake with a raging tooth, and noted how dark it was."

"The darker the better," muttered the other.

Cosmo de Ribolini rode back into the wood, wondering what had detained Vincenti.

"Perhaps he does not deem that I could go forth so soon," he mused, "and will come to-morrow. Well, there is no need for further concealment with Desmond; I will come to-morrow. And yet, the twilight is long. He *may* be here to-day. I will wait yet a little longer."

For the third time his mind went back to the packet. He would while away the time by seeing what it contained; there was light enough for that. He tore off the outer cover addressed to Signor Pietri, and found within a letter sealed with the family seal on black wax, and directed in the grandiloquent style of the period:—

"TO THE MOST NOBLE, THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS AND MOST PUISSANT SIGNOR, THE COUNT DE RIBOLINI.

"With great haste."

"For my father!" he exclaimed aloud, so great was his astonishment.

Then that strange instinct, presentiment—second sight—whatever it may be,

which sometimes tells us the contents of a letter (be they good news or bad), though it come in a strange hand, or at a time when we expect nothing—came upon him, and he knew that his father was dead before he broke the seals.

His father was dead—had died before he had left Italy. The news had followed him from place to place, and he had always missed it. If he had but waited two short hours at Venice, what comfort could he have breathed in Marcelina's ear! what hours of painful doubt, of mental struggle, of self-reproach he might have been spared! His father was dead, and his last articulate words were—"Stay my son—tell him—I forgive—mercy!" In the valley of the shadow of Death the proud old man had relented. Some gleam from the glorious face of HIM who had said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," had struck his life's burden of hatred and revenge and melted it into pity. He had passed away to seek for mercy, with mercy in his heart and forgiveness on his lips. There was a time when his son almost prayed for his death, when he thought he could receive the news without a tear. He wept, now, bitterly.

You who have watched, half stunned, in the silent house where the dear voice will be heard no more, or have lingered beside the fresh-made grave, loth to go forth into the world—*alone!* strong man though you be, you know some of the pangs he felt. But a few days ago you could charge yourself with no want of love, of duty; but now a flood of remembrances bursts upon you amidst your tears. You recall many and many an act done which might have given pain; many and many an act omitted which might have given pleasure; many and many a kindness not half requited; many and many an opportunity lost of paying a life-long debt of love. The best of sons cannot escape such self-accusation, and Cosmo de Ribolini was not to be counted as such. The dead count had never loved him, or, at least, had never shown him his love. He had been harsh and cold always. Yesterday Cosmo would have told anyone—more, he would have convinced himself—that their estrange-

ment was his father's fault. Now he asked his own conscience if he might not have anticipated death in touching the soft spot in the old man's heart, if he by his own conduct had not contributed to make that heart so stern?

It was night before he roused himself from these bitter reflections. There was no remedy. The past was in his father's grave, but the future was his own. He was the head of the house. The Rudetta was doubly dead. Desmond might proclaim his wife's lineage from the house-tops, if he pleased, and Marcelina—sweet, patient Marcelina—would be a Countess! He would bring her to England, until the gossips were done with what would be called his mesalliance, and how happy they would be all together!

Cosmo gave the letter from Mantua to Desmond to read, and he broke the news to Sweetheart, who was not unprepared for it. Her brother had told her that their father's life hung on a thread, and she had had many a cry about him with the children! With the children! Ah me! Here again the whirligig of time brings round our punishment. In our young days we hold parents to be a respectable sort of people, useful and lovable in many ways, but, as a rule, kill-joys, wet blankets, old-time folks, by no means up to the period which we illuminate. But when we have children of our own, we understand what it may be to thwart and disobey. Sweetheart hugged little Mary to her bosom, and prayed that *she* might never earn a parent's curse. She cried with the children again over the news of poor grandpapa's death. They had never heard of grandpapa, and wondered when she sobbed, "He forgave me! he forgave me at last, my darlings! but, oh, if he had only lived to tell me so!"

That night the inevitable explanation with Dick Earle was made. Poor Dick had been in a maze for the last three days, and when Tom Stevens came back he spoke his mind roundly. He was no longer of any use; he saw that he was in the way. Master Desmond had a servant who could guide the Signor to Manchester. The sooner he (Dick) went back to his

business the better. But he was too good a fellow to be treated thus, so Cosmo told him all, in the presence of Desmond and his wife. In a few days they would all go to London together.

They were seated in a room at the side of the house. The night was oppressively hot, so all the windows (or rather the shutters) were open, and they were grouped near them to get the cool.

Now Cosmo's story—as matters stood—could be told in a few words; but to make his conduct clear to Dick, the now straight skein had to be tangled and disentangled again. This took some time, especially as the narrator desired, in self defence, to show that he detested the mission on which he had started, and thought that he should never have the heart to carry it out, even before he knew that Desmond was its proposed victim. He was very emphatic in impressing this upon Dick, and, just as he had concluded this topic, he was interrupted by a cry from Sweetheart.

"Listen!" she cried. "What was that moving amongst the shrubs?"

"A rabbit," Desmond replied. "The place is overrun by them."

"They do come out on moonlight nights," she said; "but I never have seen them when it was quite dark."

There was a general laugh at the "bull," but Sweetheart persisted it was not a rabbit.

"To satisfy thee, I will go and see if anyone be about, although I heard naught," said her husband, rising.

"No, no, no!" she exclaimed, catching his arm, "you shall not go."

"Why, Sweetheart, what ails thee?"

"I know not—I—perchance it was fancy. Oh, do not leave me."

"I will tell thee what ails thee. Thou art overwrought, mine own. The excitement of the past days has made thee nervous. But go to thy bed."

"Not till you come. Let me stay with thee?" she pleaded, drawing closer to his side, and clasping his hand.

"Thou art cold—trembling," he said, tenderly.

"'Tis nothing! 'twill pass. Dear Cosmo,

forgive me, I *am* nervous, and I know not why. Do not notice me."

Desmond threw his arm around her, and signed to Cosmo to proceed.

He took up the thread at the point where he received Vincenti's message; told how he intended to hoodwink that worthy, if he had met them at their rendezvous, and read the letter reporting his father's death, and the last words he had spoken. "So now," he said, refolding it, "the vendetta is doubly at an end, first, because, as head of the house, I would not pursue it, and next, because it is plain, from my father's last words, that——"

"There again!" shrieked Sweetheart, starting up. Desmond rose, too, and folded her quivering form to his breast. He stood with his back to the open casement, she fronting it, with her face hidden on his shoulder. His soothing words and tender caresses made her lift her eyes to his—her eloquent, loving eyes! But as they rose, horror filled them! She dashed him aside, and sprang between where he had stood and the window, just as the black night was scored with a flash of flame. A loud report followed, and the Sweetheart beat its last.

Hugh Desmond's shield was the tender bosom of his wife!

CHAPTER XIII.

A BLACK NIGHT.

FOR the better elucidation of what had passed at Hugh Desmond's Staffordshire house, and of that which has yet to happen there, some description of it and its surroundings is necessary.

The house was a long, low structure, with a wing at each extremity, forming almost three sides of a square. It was in a room of one of these wings where Cosmo told his story, and Sweetheart fell, pierced by the charge intended for her husband. On the same side was a wood of some four or five acres, and which had once extended up to the walls; but Desmond had about two hundred yards of it cut down, so as to give more light and air and less

damp to his dwelling, and made a path which he bordered with evergreens, to flank each wing. A low stone wall separated the "home close" from the road in front and from the open country at the right side; the wood bounded it on the left. At the back were the stables and some unused farm buildings, which had fallen into decay.

Although Marco, in his beggarman's disguise, did not get beyond the outer gate, he made a map in his mind of the premises. He was sent to reconnoitre, and soon saw his way. He would go down the wood, creep across the cut margin where it was narrowest, gain the laurel hedge, and there watch. The chance which brought Sweetheart out, and led her to take pity on his well-feigned distress, rendered these manoeuvres unnecessary, for that day at least. They came in afterwards.

As the spy and his chief returned from that other wood, where the appearance of Desmond and Cosmo de Ribolini together revived Vincenti's suspicions, you may remember that he asked how the moon was; and being told that there was hardly any on the previous night, replied, "*The darker the better.*" He had made up his mind to go to the house, see upon what terms Cosmo was there, and act accordingly. He imparted this resolve to Marco, and was told how it could be carried out.

They entered the wood from the far side, fastened their horses to trees out of hearing, crept across the cut margin where it was narrowest, gained the laurel hedge, and watched. Hearing voices, they crept on to within four yards of the open casements of the room where Cosmo told his story, and they listened.

Carefully as they moved, they made some slight stir amongst the branches, and this was what had startled Sweetheart. The night was still, and every word that the young Italian uttered reached them. When, in reply to his wife's cry that there was something moving amongst the shrubs, Desmond proposed to go out and see if any one was about, Vincenti set his teeth and loosened his dagger in its sheath. He

dared not light the match of his pistol *then*.

It was no part of his plan to execute his hate and vengeance then and there. He came to satisfy himself respecting Cosmo, and he was satisfied. He had delayed the death of Desmond in order that a nearer representative of the house he had outraged should be present to confirm its sentence—and he heard that very one relieve it! He heard him tell how he had hoodwinked and outwitted him! He heard him read the letter which showed that he was now the head of the family, and his will its law. He learned what that will would be—Desmond would be protected! Desmond was loved by the woman he had stolen from him! Desmond would be happy!

Rage filled his heart, and banished all thought of prudence. Desmond should die! He stole back into the wood, struck a light with flint and steel carried for the purpose, lit the match of his pistol, and, maddened at the sight of the caresses with which his enemy sought to calm Sweetheart's fears, re-aroused by his returning steps, he levelled the weapon at his breast.

Poor Sweetheart saw the glowing match, and the evil face which it disclosed. In an instant, before he could recall the motion of finger upon trigger, she threw her husband aside, took his place, and died for him!

When she fell, her brother and Dick Earle thought that she had only fainted, frightened by the shot fired in the garden. Their ears had not been accustomed to the horrid hiss and thud of lead as Desmond's were. He knew that she was struck when she sank in his arms.

There was a cruel red tear on one dear soft cheek that rested on his breast, a purple spot on her delicate throat; and when he laid his hand upon her heart, and found that it beat not there came away a crimson stain upon his palm. The wall behind was scored with slugs which had missed their mark; but—ah, me!—enough had gone true!

He knew that she was dead—shot through the heart! That no human skill could save her; that she was lost to him, in the flower of her gentle life, for ever.

And yet he could do nothing—say nothing—but try to staunch the blood which flowed from her most trivial wound, with a pitiful, "Oh, look! her pretty face! her pretty face!"

"God of mercies! Is she struck?" cried Cosmo.

He lifted his hand, and showed the cruel red spot upon it.

"But not to death? Oh, say she may recover!"

Desmond laid her face upon his bosom and kissed it.

"She is dead," he said, looking up with tearless eyes, and a calmness which terrified his hearer. "Quite dead!"

The words were scarcely uttered, when there arose from the garden a cry of "Murder! help!" This aroused all but Desmond from the stupor which had held them. Snatching up the nearest weapons, Cosmo and Dick Earle sprang from the window, and ran in the direction whence the sound proceeded.

Tom Stevens and Gregory, the smith, had struck up a warm friendship, and the former was doing the honors of the kitchen when the shot was fired. On their ride back from the old mill Desmond had told them that his life was threatened, that his wife and children were in danger, and so accounted, without entering into details, for having sent for Gregory. The two were discussing this over their ale, and wondering who could have a grudge against so good a man, when they heard the report of firearms. In an instant they were on their way to the house to see what had happened, but as they crossed the yard they perceived two dark forms gliding along under cover of the evergreens, and making for the road. They gave chase, and the moment they were noticed the fugitives separated, the one turning back into the wood, the other taking to the open meadow. This was a tall, active man, and Tom (whom chance had selected as his pursuer) would have been easily outrun if accident had not helped him. The tall man slipped over a stump, fell, and before he could rise again, Tom seized him by the throat, shouting, "Murder! help!"

He had no immediate reason to use the first word; he did not know that murder had been done, but there quickly came good cause to repeat his cry, for as they rolled, struggling on the ground, Marco drew his knife and stabbed him twice in the back. At each blow he cried anew, "Murder! help!" and tightened his grasp upon the assassin's throat, holding on with the tenacity of a bull-dog, and the courage of a hero. Cosmo and Dick Earle came up only just in time. The knife was raised for the third time, and now might and strength had prevailed. The man was uppermost, and the brave boy's side unprotected against the stroke. Cosmo seized his wrist, wrenched the dagger from him, and with its pommel dealt him such a buffet on the head as laid him senseless for the next twenty minutes.

"Good lad! brave lad!" said Cosmo. "We have one of them safe; now bind him, in case he should recover, whilst we follow the other."

But poor, faithful Tom, had done all he could that day. He tried hard to rise, but fainted with pain and loss of blood. At the same moment they were joined by Gregory, who reported that he had lost all trace of the other man in the wood, where, however he had found two horses saddled and bridled (evidently those upon which the murderers had come), tethered there whilst they were at their deadly work.

"Secure the horses at once," said ready Dick, "and so cut off his chance of flight. On foot, as he is, we shall have him yet. Let us carry this poor boy to the house, and then scour the country on his own steeds. He cannot be far off."

"Quick, then," Cosmo replied. "And as for thee," (turning towards where Marco lay,) "as there is no time to bind thee, I will make sure another way." But Dick interposed.

"No, no! Would you slay a stunned man? No; villain as he is, that were a crime. Leave him to me. As soon as we have carried in the boy, I will return with cords and secure him."

They found Hugh Desmond as they had left him, on the floor of his now desolate home, with Sweetheart's head upon his

breast. The same fixed look was on his face, the same dull light in his tearless eyes. Grief had frozen up even its own expression. When they told him that he must go and dress Tom Stevens' wounds, he said, "Yes, yes, presently; but do not disturb her. Bring me a pillow."

"May we not carry her to her bed?" whispered Cosmo.

"As you will."

They led him away like a man in a trance, but the sight of his servant's wounds stung his stunned senses into life.

"Who did this?" he cried fiercely. "Who has stabbed my servant?"

"I pray thee, ask no questions now," Cosmo pleaded, "but bind up his hurts. See how they bleed."

He obeyed mechanically, but his skilful hands could not forget their office. The bleeding was staunched, and Tom revived. His first words were, "Have you got him?"

"Safe," replied Cosmo. "Even now Master Earle is binding him."

"And the other?"

"Escaped for the present; but we have his horses, and——"

At the word "escaped," Hugh Desmond uttered a cry fearful to hear. Until now the agony caused by Sweetheart's death had crushed down all thought about her destroyers. It came upon him with a crash.

"Who has escaped?" he cried. "Not Vincenti! Tell me it is not Vincenti if ye would not drive me mad! Which man is bound?"

"The tall one; but it might have been he who fired."

"The instrument—the base, cruel instrument, if it were; but not the instigator," Desmond moaned. "Why stand ye here when he is gone? To horse! to horse! and chase. But," he added in a calmer tone, "let no one harm him; leave him to me. Stay him, hold him, if fate wills that any of ye encounter him; but, an' ye love me, take not his life! Leave him to me."

Cosmo and Desmond each saddled his own horse. Earle and Gregory, to save

time, mounted those which the latter had found in the wood. There were thus two steeds left behind in the stable. No one thought of locking the door; no one remembered that the children were left alone and unprotected.

The report of the shot which made them motherless awoke the poor little things. They heard the shouts in the wood, the trampling of horses in the yard, heavy footsteps in the adjoining room, and wondered what it all could mean. They wondered more than all why mamma did not come to quiet their fears. If a storm arose at night, if a door slammed, if they awoke frightened by a dream—the next thing they knew was that her loving arms were round them, and that her soft voice was whispering between her kisses—"It is nothing; be not afraid, my darlings!" Why did she not come and kiss and comfort them now? They dare not rise in the dark, but sat up in their little bed, clutching each other, crying silently, too frightened to call out, and asking in forlorn whispers, "Oh! will dear mamma *never* come?" Never, poor little hearts! never again! The loving arms are cold—the soft voice hushed for ever!

Then the house became silent again, and their fears subsided. The very fact that dear mamma did not come consoled them after a while, "For," reasoned little Maria, "she would be sure to come if she thought we were frightened."

"Besides," said her brother, "papa's here now; so there's nothing to be frightened at."

He was not there. Besides themselves there was no living creature in the house save Tom Stevens, and he could not move hand or foot to help them. The doors stood open—left so in their hurry and excitement when Desmond and his companions rode away after the fugitive assassin. All was dark and silent.

Placing Cosmo de Ribolini, Dick Earle, and Gregory on the outskirts of the wood, Desmond entered it on foot, and searched as thoroughly as the darkness allowed. There was no one to be found, and, except for a very short distance no traces of the man they sought.

"He doubled, and made for the road," said Desmond. "When Gregory cut him off from the horses we will all gallop three miles in different directions, and then return slowly in circles towards the house. Earle, will you ride towards Stafford? Gregory, hie thee along the road to the right; I will take the open country this way; and you, Signor Cosmo, the opposite direction. Oh, God! for half an hour of daylight! Spare not your horses! Gallop out so as to head him! and then search every gully and break on either hand! Away, my friends—away! An' ye see him, shout—shout, and fire your pistols! Take him alive! Kill him only in the last extremity! He must not escape. Away!"

They understood, and obeyed him as one man. East, west, north, and south they sped. So well was the plan executed, that before the lapse of one hour, three out of the four had met and parted again, narrowing the circle. All went well at first. Just as day had begun to break, Earle and Desmond heard the report of firearms, followed by a shout from Gregory. They made a dash for the spot (the heath where Cosmo had fallen), and found, after a long chase in the adjoining wood, that it was only the hoveller, whom the smith had sighted in the half light and mistaken for their quarry. The poor wretch was snarling rabbits; and finding himself ridden after and (as he supposed) shot at, took to his heels, dived into the thickest part of the copse, and gave his pursuers a good hour's work before they found out their mistake. It was a bitter disappointment. Not only had it delayed their search at a most inopportune time, but it had left two sides of the ground open for the escape of the real fugitive.

Having thus diverted their quest, it was only fair that the hoveller should be pressed into its service. He was stationed on the hill from which Vincenti de la Torre had obtained such a good view of the surrounding country, with orders to keep a strict watch, and shout as loud as his lungs would let him if he saw any one but the hunters moving.

It was now broad daylight, and they had been six hours on horseback. They

started, convinced that the assassin of Sweetheart could not possibly escape them. They now, one and all, began to wonder how they had ever expected to catch him.

How often this will happen! We start with a sense of the hopelessness of our task, and obstacle after obstacle melts away as we approach it. We begin full of confidence, and difficulty after difficulty rises to balk us!

So it was with Desmond and his friends. The farther they rode, the closer they searched, the more hopeless did their efforts appear. What could four men do in such a country as that, all hill and valley on three sides, and a wide, rolling heath on the other, full of holes and fernbrakes, in which a dozen men could hide even in daylight? And this night was black as Erebus. Only one of them knew the lay of the land, and he made a great mistake when he chose the open country. He did so because on his good "Hafid" he was the best mounted. He did not consider that the others might lose themselves in a wood and thicket, and pass over the same ground without knowing it. All went right at first, but in a short time the well-laid plan became deranged. Cosmo mistook his direction, and rode away from the house; Gregory got lost in a wood; Earle followed the same line which Desmond had taken; and, as we have already seen, the last three all packed together at daylight. They had been six hours in the saddle, and had not spared their horses. Wearied men and jaded steeds turned back to the Grange, where they found that a further crime had been committed.

Dick Earle was the first to enter its gates, and remembering the position in which he had left the man Marco, went straight to the spot. "If that blow on the head has not settled him for good and all," he mused, "he will be conscious by this time." To his amazement neither man nor body was there! Had he slipped the ropes? No; but some one had cut them. There they lay in a dozen fragments—clean slashed through all their folds. He had scarcely realized all this, when there arose a piercing cry from the house.

Desmond had returned. Asleep beside her mother's corpse he found his girl—the boy was gone!

So also were the two fresh horses.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CASKET WITH THREE KEYS.

THE experiment made before her own eyes of the effect of sudden heat upon unholy water had considerably shaken Martha Denys' impression that her master was in league with the powers of darkness. Her son, instead of merely laughing at her fears as heretofore, set to work at removing them now that affairs had taken so grave a turn outside; and actually got her to accompany him over the old brewhouse, and judge for herself as to the character of its contents.

"Bring as much holy water as thou wilt, and throw it where thou pleasest. Thou canst rust some tools, and put out the forge fire, an thou dost pour enough; but that is all," he said.

She declined to renew her test, and listened patiently to his explanation, under which even the awe-conspiring machine itself was stripped of its demoniacal character, and stood an innocent but complicated construction of rolls, and wheels and cranks, which moved backwards and forwards at her will. The bones, about which the town was raving, had no horrors for her. She had seen them come in a cart.

But the strongest influence in her master's favor—an influence which removed her last suspicion, and made her his warm defender—arose out of his condemnation by the people, and their ingratitude. The man who had saved her life, whose bounty to the poor had passed through her hands, whose unnumbered acts of kindness were well-known to her, was at his worst (as it seemed) a noble soul tempted by the evil one. As such she had feared for him, prayed for him, and loved him throughout. How dared they (the people) condemn him! How dared they circulate and credit such lies! How dared they threaten his life!

You may force yourself to believe hard things against one you love! may blame him, may grow cold to him; but let an outsider come and give expression to your own convictions, and away fly hard thoughts, and blame, and coldness, leaving the love stronger than ever. Take sides between husband and wife, and see if you don't make enemies of both. Interfere with the intestine strife of a nation, and the belligerents will make peace if only to resent your impertinence. Had the good folks of Manchester let Hugh Desmond alone, it is possible that some unsatisfied doubt would have smouldered in the breast of his house-keeper for all time; but treating him as they did, the last spark was extinguished.

Loyally and bravely she remained at her post, guarding the house confided to her care, though several well-disposed neighbors begged her to quit the accursed place, and offered her a home with them. Not a step would she budge, not a door would she open, though Master Willford tried hard to get admission under various pretences. Loyally and bravely she met the accusations current against her absent master, and stood up for him; rated some roundly for their ingratitude, and some for their folly, getting sharp answers and cold looks for her pains, until at last she was pelted in the streets, and the awful cry, "Witch! witch!" raised after her once more.

This was Master Willford's work. It did not suit him that his strong point—the discovery of those bones—should be explained away. Now that Desmond was pronounced a wizard, all he had argued in favor of the poor old woman went for naught. The crafty witch-finder had only to recall what had passed that day on the banks of the Irwell, not only to render innocuous all Martha Denys could say, but to keep her at home on peril of her life. Thus he silenced her, and kept the fire ablaze against her master.

She was quite alone now. Ten days had passed since Gregory had gone—she knew not whither—at Hugh Desmond's bidding, and nothing had been heard of him. She had no friend, no protection now, and so

great had become the outcry against her that she dared not set her foot abroad even to buy the ordinary necessities of life. She was half-starved; but the thought of escaping her trouble by flight never entered her mind. The suspicion that Desmond had deserted her never once dawned upon it. Knowing the temper of the town as she did, she prayed that he might not return. Gregory would warn him. Gregory would be sent for her—might come at any moment. So the faithful creature waited and watched, true to her charge, true to her faith in the goodness of the man for whose sake she had been beaten from the streets and denied a crust of bread.

For the last day or two she had lived on unleavened cakes made from some grain she found in the stable, and which, as there was no fuel left in the house, she baked at the forge. She had now got quite accustomed to the old brewhouse. There was barely a measure of corn to begin with, and just two handfuls of it were left. They were put by for the present, but hunger drove her to them long before its dawn. She pounded the grain as fine as she could, mixed the dough, blew up the fire into a blaze, and by its light saw what she took for Hugh Desmond's ghost watching her.

Her terror was so intense that she could neither shriek or move, or turn her eyes from the object, or evade it as it rose and placed a hand on her shoulder. Well might she take it for her master's spirit, if spirits from the other world appear as when Death's icy hand closes upon them in this. Wan, haggard, aged, shrunken, and grey, as though twenty years had passed over his head; but it was Hugh Desmond, alive! His hand upon her shoulder was flesh and blood, but his face was the ghost of what she remembered it, and from his lips came the ghost of his once cheery voice.

"Why, Martha! thou here? For what purpose hast thou lit the fire?"

In a few words she told him her plight, and his peril.

"Good, faithful friend," he exclaimed, "thou shalt not suffer," and he made towards the door.

"What wouldst thou do?" she cried, detaining him.

"Buy thee food."

"They will kill thee."

"Let them."

"Master! master! they have threatened——"

"The curs! Yes, they have threatened, have snarled, but they dare not bite."

"But thou art unarmed," persisted the dame, touching his empty belt.

"This," raising his riding-whip, "will suffice. I pray thee let me pass."

All good folks had been abed and asleep for two hours when Hugh Desmond strode along the dark and deserted streets to the Golden Boar. To take the bull by the horns, to bell the cat, to meet danger three-fourths of the way, had been his policy through a life which had known many dangers, and he was not going to flinch now. He made straight for the Golden Boar, knocked up a drawer, made a raid upon the larder, and was on his way back, laden with meat, bread, and wine, before that domestic was fairly awake, and could summon courage to cry "Thieves!" which he did lustily, as soon as the marauder was well out of hearing.

The first person who appeared in answer to this alarm was Master Willford. Perhaps he had been roused by the knocking, for he came forth from his chamber dressed and with his sword on.

Leaving Dame Martha to appease her hunger, Hugh Desmond went to his own room and returned with several parchments and a small iron box.

"Give me all your attention," he said, "for what I have to say is of the last import to me, and—what is left of mine."

"What is left?" she asked, struck by the utter despair which marked his concluding words.

"Aye, what is left," he repeated. "Sometimes it seems as though it were years and years ago, sometimes as but yesterday, good Martha, that I had a loving, tender wife and two sweet children. Nay, interrupt me not. My wife is dead—murdered. My boy was stolen from me by her assassins in the confusion which followed her death. I must, I *will* find him, Martha,

and every hour I delay here may add days to my agony of suspense, therefore ask no questions, but do my bidding. Thou hast been faithful in a small matter; can I trust thee with a weighty one?"

"I am but a poor lone woman, and——"

"Yes, yes, I know what thou wouldst say. Gregory, thy son, will be here to-morrow. He will take thee to a place of safety, but I must leave at once, perhaps never to return."

"It is best so," she replied, quickly. "Thy life——"

"Is a charmed one, I fear," he said, "but let that pass. I am a rich man in worldly goods; and these" (laying his hand upon the parchments)—"represent the bulk of my possessions. I may not carry them with me. I must place them in safe custody until I find my boy, or——Now, mark me: I shall place them in yonder casket. It was intended for a very different purpose, but it will serve for this. It opens with three keys, if they be properly applied. Here they are: one iron, one silver, one gold. Should opportunity serve, I shall make a formal disposition of my property by will in favor of my children—or my child; and if I should fall before we meet again, thou wilt deliver the casket and its contents to such as by my will are entitled to hold it. But I may have no chance of making such a disposition, therefore I have shown thee these keys. They will speak my will. If ever they are brought to thee, be sure that Hugh Desmond is dead, and that the bearer has been trusted by him with them, *and more*. Dost comprehend me?"

"I do; but how am *I* to protect so sacred a charge?" cried Martha, wringing her hands.

"Thy son will help thee."

"Alas! he is but a poor smith, and when thou art gone——"

"I have many powerful enemies," he interrupted, "and my friends are few and humble—all but one. I try to submit to the punishment with which it has pleased God to afflict me, but I do *not* believe that my sins will be visited upon my innocent children. I believe in the Almighty's justice, and in some men's gratitude."

"Be sure of mine," she said, taking his hand, and kissing it.

Martha Denys was an old woman, not in years, perhaps, but worn and faded by care. She had nothing of the charm which makes the winter of a happy life as lovely as its spring. Her grey locks were scanty, her eyes were dim, her cheeks haggard and colorless, and yet as she spoke there came into her face a light which made it almost beautiful—the light of truth shining from a grateful heart.

"Thou hast proved thyself loyal and true," he replied, "so has thy son, and so also has a poor lad who is grievously hurt for my sake. You are the only three upon whom I can count, for the other will soon go to his own country."

"Oh, master! there be surely others! Thou art so generous, so noble! Be certain thou hast made friends, great and powerful."

"When Goliath of Gath came forth against Israel, did the king's captains save him? Did his mighty men of war rid him of the Philistines? No! a pebble of the brook from the sling of a poor shepherd slew the giant. God's ways are not our ways, Martha Denys, and He has planted a conviction here" (laying his hand upon his heart)—"which tells me who will protect the innocent when I am gone. It was in my mind," he continued, after a pause, "to take an oath from thee that thou wouldst faithfully perform the trust of which I spoke just now."

"I will swear."

"Thou shalt, but as above, hear me first."

He rose, lifted his right hand on high, and in a measured solemn voice spoke these words.

"*May God so deal with me and mine, as I and they—knowing of this my vow—deal with thee and thine; so long as there may be a Desmond with power to protect, and a Denys who needs protection.*

She knelt by his side, and echoed him thus:

"*And may He so deal with me and mine; as I and they—with knowledge of my oath—deal with thee and thine; so long*

as there may be a Denys to serve and a Desmond who needs our service."

He stooped down over her, kissed her poor furrowed brow with a son's reverence, gathered up the parchments, and was about to open the casket which was to contain them, when it suddenly occurred to him that he had left the outer gate, leading from the yard into the street, open. Going out for Dame Martha's supper he had only closed, without fastening it, and returning with his hands full, had shouldered it ajar and passed in intending to come back and bolt it when he had disposed of his load. He "made" it securely enough this time, and once more had his hand on the casket.

This strange piece of workmanship has been described in the first chapter of my story. It was not quite finished even now as to its outward decoration, but this did not affect its strength. Though by no means large, it was immensely strong, and compact. Small as were its keys, they moved with ease three broad bolts of steel which shot into the mass of the lid, and held it as though it were forged in one mass with the rest. No violence from without could loosen their hold; no instrument known in those days could force them. The casket might, indeed, be broken to pieces by repeated blows of the heaviest sledge-hammer, but nothing, save its own keys, could open it; and they had to be applied—as its maker had hinted—*properly*. He had expressed all the knowledge of lock-making he had acquired abroad, and all his own ingenuity in making the opening a puzzle. It was a labor of love. The casket was intended for Sweetheart's jewels, and often, as he worked upon it, he had smiled in anticipation of her surprise when, with the keys at her command, she should find that she could not open it. Alas! she was in her grave. She would never see the quaint fancies his loving hands had fashioned for her. They would never be completed now.

He gathered up the parchments, and opened the casket in this wise. He unlocked it with the gold key; he unlocked it with the silver key; he *locked* it with

the key of iron, and, this done, a fourth key hole appeared, into which the gold key being pressed, without turning it, the lid rose by itself. To close it, the above process had to be reversed.

Then he returned to where Dame Martha sat, pondering over what he had told her, and indicating the small iron box, before mentioned, said,

"This is for thee. Gregory will be here to-morrow — perhaps to-night. He will help thee to remove the casket, but in the meantime I will place it beyond the reach of our enemies."

As he spoke he pressed his heel upon the corner of one of the flagstones close to the forge and it turned up on a pivot disclosing a small vault.

"I know not for what purpose this place was made," he said, as she drew back in surprise and crossed herself vigorously, "I discovered it by accident, and little thought it would some day stand me in need. It will serve me now."

He lowered the casket, replaced the stone, and continued, "I have given thee and thy son this house with all it contains. When the brainless cry against us, has died out (as it will shortly) thou can'st return and dwell here or deal with the place as ye list. It is thine. For thy present wants take this (pressing a heavy purse into her hand). If I am alive this day month, I will see thee again where Gregory will conduct thee, and — Ha! What mean those lights?"

She had no time to thank him for his bounty, and one glance through the half-closed door sufficed to answer the question which had interrupted his instructions.

The street was full of an infuriated mob bearing torches and shouting "He has come back! He is in his Devil's den again! Death to the Wizard!"

"Fly, for thy life," whispered Martha; "fly by the yard wicket door which leads to the river—lose not a moment—fly or they will kill thee.

"But the casket—the papers!"

"Leave them to me. What are they in comparison with thy life? Fly, fly!"

"And abandon thee to their fury? Never!"

"I have a hiding-place they cannot find. For thy children's sake save thyself, and trust to me."

She barred the massive doors of the laboratory as she spoke. The mob was increasing, the shouts grew louder. As the fugitives crossed the yard the whole street seemed ablaze, but the enemy was too infuriated to think of the commonest strategy. Their attack was confined to the front; the rear was dark and silent. Desmond had gained the fields by the water side, and Dame Martha was in her hiding-place, before a crash and a fierce cheer announced that the outer gates had given way, and the house was at the mercy of the mob.

Some made for the dwelling rooms and began to destroy and plunder, but the main body surrounded the old brew house waving their torches and screaming "Burn him! Burn him in his den!" Whilst the most vigorous and practical brought straw from the stable, and faggots from the wood stack, which they piled against the doors, or threw torches through the windows, to carry out the verdict. A goodly heap of combustible matter was thus obtained, and was well ablaze when Master Willford appeared on the scene agitated by the strangest excitement. He dashed aside those who were feeding the flames. He tore away the burning faggots with his naked hands. He stamped upon the glowing straw and shouted to his friends—his dear friends! to help him for God's sake.

"Put out the fire!" he shouted; "drag these logs away, bring water! Oh, bring water!"

Now Master Willford was the instigator, if not the leader, of this raid. He had followed Desmond from the "Golden Boar" unperceived by him, into the yard, where, crouched under one of the lower windows, he overheard a good deal of what Dame Martha had been told. Luckily for himself he made good his retreat a few moments before her master bethought him of the open door. Late as it was the witch-finder knocked up his principal adherents. He told them that the Lord had delivered the Wizard into their hands, and bade each go forth, and rouse the righteous

of his acquaintance—with what result we know. The news ran fast—too fast. The mob rose, and had half done their work before their chief arrived to direct it.

CHAPTER XV.

MINE AND COUNTERMINE.

ENTHUSIASM is catching. Master Willford seemed so thoroughly in earnest in his own efforts to put out the fire, and called so peremptorily for help to do so, that many took it for granted that he must be right, and assisted him. Some dragged away the crackling faggots, and some ran for water to throw upon them, Master Willford encouraging them with a "Well done! Bravely done! More water, good lad. Ha! that was right! Oh, my masters, how could you have been so rash? Out with the fire; then we will force the doors, and take him alive!"

He did not want to take him alive; but it by no means suited him that they should burn the old brewhouse, where the casket was. It was not eagerness to capture the reputed wizard alive which prompted his efforts against the doors, when the fire had been scattered and stamped out. It was not Hugh Desmond he was striving so hard to save.

Under his directions axes were procured, and many a lusty blow fell upon the great doors. A heavy bench was brought from the house, and made into a battering-ram, which six strong men charged against them. When they gave way, the mob would rush in and execute their blind vengeance upon the wizard, and—all would be well.

Thud—d! thud—d! thud—d! went the battering-ram; but the great doors shook and groaned—that was all. Iron-clasped, and bossed all over, they were too hot to handle, too strong to yield to the instruments brought against them.

A sullen murmur ran through the crowd. Master Willford had spoiled their sport. Master Willford could not force the entrance, as he had promised. Why hadn't he left them alone? What right had he to order them? What was the use of

breaking in?—burning was a proper death for a wizard!

He knew what mobs are made of, and he knew that this one was slipping from under his control. His once most obedient adherents had thrown down their improvised battering-engine, saying it was no use, and were muttering together.

The old cry, "Death to the wizard! Burn him! burn him!" again arose; and some began to collect the fragments of the extinguished bonfire in order to begin again their own way. They were spared this trouble. One of the torches which had been flung through the windows before Master Willford's arrival, had fallen into the corner which Desmond used as a laboratory. As it fell, it broke a large flask full of alcohol, and sent its contents in a flaring stream over and down the shelving, which, being constructed of old and dry wood, was quickly enveloped in flames. The roof had caught, and the whole inside was well aglow before the mob—concentrated at the front, where there was no aperture but those obstinate doors—became aware of the joyful fact.

As they rebelled and scattered, some passing round the side saw the light; and then what a scream of exultation arose! The cursed place was on fire within. They had the wizard now. If they could not break in, he could not break out. He was doomed. His own evil den would be his death-pyre!

His persecutors became drunk with joy. No one could restrain them now. More torches were hurled through the windows; but the flames within needed no such stimulant. They roared and raged like some caged monster, until at last they burst forth. Down came the roof with an awful crash, dragging with it the greater portion of one of the side walls.

Smothered under this mass of brick and dust, the conflagration never regained its mastery. Here and there it flickered up, but it had done its worst.

When the flames first blazed out, the heat became so great that the mob was forced back, step by step, until the yard was abandoned. Fortunately for adjacent houses, there was no wind; the flames

went straight up into the calm night. Hugh Desmond, riding alone over Kersal Moor, saw the light in the sky, and knew what it meant.

Before daybreak the fire, and the fury of those who had raised it, burned themselves out. The one left a black heap of smoking ruins; the other an unpleasant feeling that a mistake had been made, for which some one would have to answer. When the joyful fact that the "devil's den" was on fire inside became known, a score of eager disputants contended for the honor and glory of having thrown the torch which lit the conflagration. It was curious now to note that no one would admit having had a torch at all! Every one had just come out to see what was going on—no more.

Master Willford came into favor again, and the number of persons who begged him to remember how actively they had assisted him in putting *out* the fire was remarkable. Several of these had cursed and hustled him when the fickle crowd turned against his interference; but he bore no malice. He not only forgave, but forgot—or pretended to forget, which came to the same thing—that any differences had arisen. They were all there to put *out* the fire. No one had thrown any torch. The wretched man (meaning Desmond) must have fired the place by accident in his endeavor to escape, or—here the speaker turned his eyes towards Heaven, clasped his hands, and sighed.

Wizard or no wizard, you could not burn a man's house over his head, even in those good old times, for nothing. Report ran that there were two dead bodies under that black and smoking pile, and Master Coroner was at work to find them.

Master Coroner was a much greater man in the good old times than he is now. He was not a respectable apothecary, or a second-class attorney, but one of the highest dignitaries in the county. He did not hold his court in the parlor of the "Cat and Bagpipes," assisted by a jury, which, affected by the associations of the spot, gave the characteristics of a free and easy to their proceedings, and shout "hear, hear," when he sums up to their

satisfaction. Master Coroner of the old sort ran no risk of being bullied over his accounts by a court of quarter sessions, because he had no accounts to render. He rode to his quest with a dozen men at arms at his back, and his word was law. When Shakespeare makes his second grave-digger in "Hamlet" ask, "Is that law?" and the first replies, "Aye, marry! Crowner's quest law," no sneer is intended as I read the text. On the contrary. "Crowner's quest law" was not to be trifled with in the good old times.

Master Coroner satisfied himself that Desmond and Martha Denys were in the old brewhouse when it was assailed by the mob, and there being nothing to show that they got out, set his men at work to find their bodies. Thus far he acted wisely and well; but he made a serious mistake when, misled by Master Willford's supposed interposition in the interests of law and order, he appointed him to direct the search.

He commenced his operations exactly over the spot where Desmond had opened the casket. This was also where the side wall had fallen in and smothered the flames. As long as the laborers worked, he watched. He never left them a moment. Whenever a half-charred beam was removed, he was the first to examine the spot uncovered. Whenever a spade struck against any hard substance, he would thrust down his hand to find out what it was. He showed so much care and diligence the first two days, that Master Coroner left the business entirely in his charge.

Still, I say that Master Coroner made a mistake. Had there been a dozen dead bodies under those ruins, not one of them would have been found—by the workmen, at least. Without a body, there could not be an inquest; without an inquest, there could be no investigation into Desmond's affairs. He was the last of his race—so far as was known in Manchester. He had no kith or kin to ask what property he left. His estates would revert to the crown—or *might be taken possession of by any one who was clever enough to find out where they were, and hold his tongue!* But

if a body were found and an inquisition held, everybody would know as much as Stephen Willford.

This careful searcher was the first to arrive in the morning, the last to leave at night. He took a look around before the others arrived and after they left. He locked the yard and house doors, and carried the key in his belt. The house was deserted, and no one could get into the yard without his permission—at least, so he thought.

But every night, when all was still and dark, two men and a woman appeared, as though by magic, in that corner of the burned building where the walls were still standing. They could not work openly without being discovered, so they began to drive a sort of tunnel through the debris, which would lead them straight to where the forge had stood. Slowly and silently they worked; and when daybreak was near they hid the mouth of their shaft with rubbish, and disappeared as suddenly as they had come.

This went on for about a week; Master Willford clearing away the ruins by day, the others undermining them by night. Sooner or later, if they both went on in the directions they had taken, they would meet. On the eighth night only a yard or two separated them. A few vigorous blows of the pick by the recognized laborers would disclose the tunnel of the night-workers! These blows were not to be given.

That very night something compact and heavy, that was not a stone or a lump of bricks, was passed through the tunnel and carried off by one of the men, accompanied by the woman. The other man went back to the end of the shaft, and scattered the contents of two large flasks he had brought with him upon the half-burned ruins on either side.

When Master Willford arrived in the morning, he was surprised to see small whiffs of smoke curling up here and there from the ruins. He noticed also that the latter were unusually hot. He and his workers had now got down to things which were almost untouched by the fire, though crushed by the falling roof. Supposing

that some relics of heat were still smouldering below, he caused water to be poured over the spot from which the smoke issued. This only increased it. He walked round to the far end to see if there were any heat there, and in his absence some of the laborers dragged out a larger rafter, with the object of giving better play to their water.

No sooner had they done so than a column of flame sprang forth. The most furious bursts of the original conflagration were pale and tame in comparison with this. It seemed to set the very stones on fire. It spread with amazing rapidity. In less time, almost, than one takes to write the words, it formed there new craters. It shed a thick black smoke, which choked and blinded the astonished workmen, and drove them back far into the street. It did not flare and crackle like ordinary fire, but consumed all before it silently, as a piece of silver-paper is burned up!

Weeks afterwards, when what was left of the ruins could be examined, brick and stone were found melted, and glued together in fantastic vitreous lumps by the intensity of its heat. Nothing that fire could destroy escaped it. The great machine lay a shapeless mass of metal! Any human body would, of course, have been utterly encindered, and so the search for Desmond's remains and those of his housekeeper were abandoned.

Ignorance, and its ally—Superstition—accounted for this new wonder in their own style. It was the Demon's work! There were secrets buried under those ruins which he did not wish to see the light. That was no common fire—it was the horrid element of the bottomless pit, specially exported for the purpose! And they were partly right; it was *not* common fire, but it did not come from the store indicated, nor had the arch-fiend any direct hand in its application. It was simply Greek fire, which Hugh Desmond had learned to prepare.

Why did he thus destroy the ruins of his laboratory? He had two reasons: he wished to stop the search for his (supposed) dead body, and to conceal his removal of the casket. He was content that

all his enemies—and especially Vincenti de la Torre—should consider him as dead. If the search continued, and no remains were found, a doubt, which might put that person on his guard, would arise, and be strengthened by the discovery of the tunnel, which he had no time to fill up. He remained concealed at Prestwick (where he met Gregory by previous arrangement) the night of the attack upon his house. Found out through the smith where his mother was concealed; joined her in disguise; and when the turmoil and excitement over the second fire was at its height, these three slipped quietly out of the town unchallenged and unrecognized.

And they took the casket with them!

Witch-finding, when conducted upon abstract principles, was poor work. There was nothing—not even glory—to be got out of roasting a lot of miserable old women in those *good old days*. So much the worse for the abstract principles, thought the more advanced professors of this art and mystery, amongst whom Master Willford was a shining light. The fear and horror caused by roastings, for which certain ignorant, but honest fanatics were responsible, placed a weapon in the hands of their unprincipled successors, which they used with considerable profit. These practitioners had to roast a witch or two occasionally, just to keep up the excitement; but their grand *coups* were directed against well-to-do middle-class people, who would either fly from an accusation of witchcraft, or pay black mail to suppress it. If they fled, they left pickings; if they remained, they were plucked! If one took heart of grace and resisted, she was tried *pour encourager les autres*. We have seen what “trying” (in this connection) meant in the case of Martha Denys. It was only one degree removed from execution. Conducted upon these principles, witch-finding became a profitable business.

The feelings which Master Willford entertained towards Hugh Desmond had changed materially since the day when that malicious bodkin-thrust was given. Then he only hated him for the pain and disappointment he had caused. Later on, he perceived in him an opponent whose

presence would be a perpetual stumbling-block in his path; and lastly, he saw how he might obtain revenge, immunity, and wealth, all by one blow! This was when, crouching under the window, he overheard the conversation between Desmond and Dame Martha. He determined to hound the already excited populace upon them, and to seize for himself the casket and the deeds it contained. The mob, as we know, were a little too quick for him, and spoiled his plan by firing the brew-house.

Well, obtaining the casket was one means towards his end. This had failed, but there were others as yet untried. He worked them out in his cold, cruel mind, as though they were sums in arithmetic.

Desmond was dead—that was his starting point—and had left considerable wealth *somewhere*. For whom? For a child which had remained for years unrecognized. Was that child likely to be aware of its rights? Who was there to uphold her in claiming them? Four persons only, according to her father's statement. One who would shortly leave the country, and upon whom he seemed to place little reliance; Dame Martha; her son, the smith; and a wounded servant, not named. Everything went to show Desmond had chosen the dame as his confidante in chief, and intended that the others should be informed and instructed through her. She had perished, and her vow ended with her life. Who could prove now that Desmond had ever been married? The whole course of his life, since his return to England, was, practically, a denial of the fact. A man in his position—argued Master Willford—does not hide away his wife, whatever he might do with one who stood in another relationship.

This point could be dealt with where it arose. At present there was no occasion to raise it. By way of putting out a feeler to discover the direction and force of possible opposition, the witchfinder obtained an order to take possession of the house and premises of the deceased, Hugh Desmond, at Manchester, for the benefit of whomsoever it might concern—and it appeared to concern no one.

Then he advanced a step, and took out administration to all the estate and effects of Hugh Desmond, lately departed this life.

In doing this he invited opposition, but none appeared. But where was all that estate; and what were those effects? Was he after all to get nothing for his trouble beyond the half-burned, wholly-plundered house at Manchester? It appeared so. As he turned the matter over and over in his active mind, he became more and more convinced that the delicate-handed master-mariner from the Netherlands—Signor Porras—was in some way mixed up with Desmond's affairs, and knew his secrets. Why, otherwise, should he have troubled himself to get up that charge against Gregory? Why have taken such personal interest in the search for which it was made the excuse? Why have left the town immediately afterwards? Again, what were the errands of those messengers? of the rider from London looking for a foreigner, supposed to be with Signor Porras, and of the other (on Desmond's own horse), who came after him and relieved him of his mission? Signor Porras and his man had gone away for a week (as they had told their host), leaving their baggage behind them; and they had not been heard of for six! during which time Desmond's wife—or at any rate the mother of his children—had been killed and his boy carried off! All this taken together gave Master Willford hopes that he should yet obtain the clue he sought. And he was not mistaken.

One evening Senor Porras rode up to the "Golden Boar" alone, much changed in appearance. His once grave, cold manner had left him. He had become restless, and assumed a levity inconsistent with his character, and strangely at variance with the haggard expression of his face, and the hunted look in his eyes. When told what had befallen Hugh Desmond, great was his horror and surprise!—too great, thought Master Willford; for this crafty one had seen him halt at the scene of the late catastrophe, and gaze wistfully at the ruins as he came into the town.

"He knew all," mused the witch finder,

"before he was told about it here. He would not have come if he had not known it."

He had been ill—so he said—with fever and prayed Master Willford to let him share his room, for he knew not at what moment his sickness might return. He pressed this request with childish persistence; repeating it frequently after it had been granted. Sometimes when Desmond was mentioned he would start up with a moan or a cry, and adjure his companion for God's sake not to speak of him, and yet ten minutes afterwards he would himself return to the subject.

At night he had frightful dreams, and muttered in his sleep. It may be that this broke Master Willford's rest—it may be that he did not seek slumber. He did not complain, and as soon as the muttering began he was leaning over the pillow of the dream-haunted man, catching every word that escaped his lips.

Thus passed four days. On the morning of the fifth Signor Porras bade his host farewell. Master Willford also took leave of his friends. It would be some months—he said—before he should see them again.

His friend was going to London, and as his own business lay in that direction, they would ride together.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE KING'S BUSINESS.

COSMO DE RIBOLINI, Dame Martha, and her son were the only three persons who knew that the burning ruins of his laboratory were not Hugh Desmond's grave. Dick Earle returned to London the day after Sweetheart's funeral. Tom Stevens was too ill with his wounds, and little Maria too young to be told anything. It suited Desmond that the news of his death should be spread abroad. Where he was unknown he became his own biographer, and told the strange story in many a town which he visited in his renewed chase of the assassins. He made what hunters call "a cat." Manchester, Shrewsbury, Coventry, Derby, and intervening points, formed his first circle.

Then deeming that they would seek a seaport, he tried Hull and Bristol—all in vain. Cosmo went with him, and their common grief ripened respect and pity into a warm friendship.

"Trust me, brother mine," said the latter one day, "that my first counsel to thee was wise. They know not thy country well enough to take cross roads, or hie them to a small port. They have made for London, and to London we should go."

"I am known there," Desmond replied.

"To how many?—A score, maybe. Thou needst not go in their way. There be many places, I'll warrant in that great city, where none would imagine or busy themselves about thee. I have thy good friend Master Earle."

"He must not know."

"Is he not trustworthy?"

"Aye, true as steel, but there are those about him who might, unwittingly, betray me. The fewer there are in a secret the more likely is it to be kept."

"True; but the more there are in a secret the better chance of success. Your friend, the goldsmith, can help me to find de la Torre, without being told anything about thee."

"Thou art right," Desmond replied, after a pause; "we will go to London, and if we fail there——"

"I will tell thee," interrupted Cosmo.

"If we fail in London we will go straight to Italy. The 'Venno' is at my orders; he will hunt these murderers in their own country, where they are known, and to which, believe me, they are sure to return as quickly as they can."

"But my boy—my lost boy—?" moaned Desmond.

"Thou shalt seek him wheresoever thou wilt. The path to him is through them; but in the meantime thou must provide a home for his sister."

"She is safe with Dame Martha."

"Safe may be," said Cosmo, a little loftily; "but the blood which runs in her veins demands gentler nurture than the good dame can afford. The lady, who will soon be my wife, will take charge of her for my sake, and quickly learn to love her for her own."

Desmond pressed his hand in silence.

"Besides," continued Cosmo, "an thou didst leave her here thou wouldst be in daily fear—I know thee—for her safety."

"She is all left to me—God help me!"

Cosmo had no comfort to give him. He had no doubt but that little Hugh was with his mother. The child would have embarrassed her murderers in their flight. His presence would have served to identify them. During the search already made, Desmond had heard of many passing strangers, amongst whom might have been those he sought, but in no case was there a child with them.

"There will be an outcry when I marry," said Cosmo, to change the subject, "so I shall bring my bride to England for a while. It likes me much, this England, brother mine. By that time thou wilt have come to life again."

"For what?" he asked, sadly. "To drag about for a few years longer this poor body, which is but the coffin of a dead heart, and dead hopes."

To London they went. Desmond hid himself under an assumed name in the Borough of Southwark, and Cosmo took up his quarters once more with Martin Earle, whom he found in great grief at the loss of his friend, and indignation at the charges made against him. For you may be sure that the story of his end had not lost any of its wonders on the way. 'Prentice Dick was heartily sorry too, and had other troubles on his mind which he took the first opportunity of imparting to Cosmo.

"Thou hast told mine uncle nothing of his wife" (like most people who speak of the newly dead, he did not mention names), he said, half as a question and half as a reproach.

"Did we not both promise him solemnly to keep silence on that subject?"

"Aye, we did; but he is dead now."

"The more reason that we should keep our vow."

"But the child, signor—the child?"

"Is in my charge; let that suffice, Master Earle."

"Then it behoves thee to look to her interest."

"Most certainly I shall."

"We—I mean mine uncle—has a large sum in his hands which belonged to her father, and should now be hers," said Dick, after a pause.

"Art sure?"

"Certain. Some of it is placed out at usance; some is in our coffers."

"Dost know the amount?"

"Some ten thousand pounds."

"Well, let it remain where it is. It could not be in better keeping, good Dick. Let it remain where it is, for the present at least. And mark me! As thou loved my brother, keep his secret, until——"

"Go on: until?"

"Until we have found that black-hearted villain who slew my sister, and stole her boy," Cosmo replied, quickly. "That is what I meant. Then little Maria may claim her own in safety."

"I see; thou art right, Signor," mused Dick.

And so the subject ended for that day.

It came up again before the week was out. A stranger called upon the goldsmith, and had a long private conference with him, armed with certain papers which authorized him to take possession, in the name of the Crown, of all the estate and effects of Hugh Desmond, who had died intestate, and leaving no kin to inherit his wealth. This stranger made no definite claim upon Martin Earle. He came for information, having heard that the goldsmith had at one time been the deceased man's agent, and, as such, might know where he had disposed of his property. Would he (Earle) help him? His name was Willford—Stephen Willford a humble servant of my lord the Bishop of Chester—to discharge his trust?"

The goldsmith was man of business enough to see that the documents produced were in order, and man of the world enough not to say so. He replied that Master Desmond had indeed consulted him as to the placing of his monies, and perhaps he might be able to find out where they had been invested; but Master Willford would excuse his saying that he must have some legal advice before he took an active part in such investigations.

Master Willford was not the least of-

fended. They would go together to some man of law, at the goldsmith's own convenience. There was no hurry, only—he added with some emphasis—as it was the king's business there must be no unnecessary delay.

Master Willford stated his case well—not a word too much, not an expression or a tone which could suggest any personal interest in it. And his finale was a clincher. It was dangerous to hinder the king's business in those *good old days*. There was only one thing not quite clear to Martin Earle, and this was—how did his visitor find out that he had had business transactions with Hugh Desmond? He asked the question, and was told that the fact had been gleaned from some books and papers saved from the fire. Now we know that there was absolutely nothing saved from the fire; but you will remember that good Signor Porras was busy with certain books and papers, whilst Master Constable was fussing about the old brew-house the day when perquisition was made for Marco's purse.

Master Willford took his departure, having arranged to call again that time on the morrow, and accompany Master Earle to the man of law who was to advise him; and as soon as he was gone the goldsmith called Dick, and bade him make up a statement of Hugh Desmond's account. Dick, having that conversation with Cosmo de Ribolini fresh in his mind, was somewhat confused at this order, and asked, "What for?" Whereupon his uncle, who was not in his usual good humor, bade him mind his own business, sharply. Dick swallowed the snub and set to work, but with an inward resolve that his task should not be an easy, or at any rate a short one.

Of course he told Cosmo, and the two, putting this and that together, came readily to the conclusion that the stranger had something to do with it; and when Master Earle casually mentioned his late visitor's name, the truth flashed upon them both. Willford, the witch-finder, Desmond's enemy, the man who had stirred up all Manchester against him; his murderer, in the belief of one of them, was seeking to gain possession of his estate!

What was to be done! Consult with Desmond? thought Cosmo. Most assuredly that was the first thing. The result of such consultation would arrange the rest. But how was Dick, who thought him dead, to be put off? How was the goldsmith to be delayed? mused Dick. Master Willford might waive the necessity for a formal account. Martin Earle might take the preparation of one out of his 'prentice's hands and render it himself. "He has it at his fingers' ends," moaned Dick; "*he* could do it in an hour." Cosmo, utterly bewildered, mounted the high horse, and told the 'prentice to occupy himself with his own affairs. Dick, smarting under the former application of this formula, fired up and told him roundly that it *was* his own affair. His uncle and master was being imposed upon.

"Leave it all to me," said the young noble, more haughtily than ever, "and meddle not with things which neither thy years or thy station permit thee to understand."

This was too much for Dick.

"Leave it all to thee!" he cried. "That is what thou saidst to poor Master Desmond, and a pretty evil thou didst bring upon him! But for thee and thy wise counsels his wife would be alive and his boy safe. To the devil with thy family secrets, thy mysteries, and thy cut-throat Vendettas! I'll none of them. Leave it all to thee, quotha! No, Signor: this is England, and a good merchant of London is not to be cozened, or a little maiden robbed of her rights, whilst an indifferent honest 'prentice is about to see justice done."

"When thou hast recovered thy senses thou mayest ask my pardon for this insolence," Cosmo replied loftily, taking up his hat and sword. "For the present thine *honesty* will do well to ponder on the promise under which thy betters trusted thee."

Ten minutes afterwards he was sorry for having used this taunt. He could not but admire Dick's bull-dog character, and one shot which the 'prentice had fired in his anger went home. Desmond had never reproached him, but he had often

reproached himself for over confidence in his own schemes. But for him Sweet-heart might indeed have been spared, and her child be safe. Dick's words fell like a blow upon a bruise. Well, he would see Desmond; tell him what had happened, get his permission to undeceive the lad (and his uncle too, if need be), and then their quarrel could be easily made up. He took a wherry, crossed the Thames to the landing-place nearest to where Desmond lodged, but found him not. He had been out all day, mayhap he would be back soon, said the drawer, mayhap not at all that day. He was very uncertain. Cosmo's stock of English was too small for questioning, so he said he'd wait, and waited.

Three hours passed, night came on, and no Desmond! To go back and face Dick again, as unprepared as ever to answer him, was one evil—to remain where he was, unable to make himself understood with the risk of being turned out into the street if Desmond did not appear; was another. Which was the least? Cosmo turned them over in his mind and chose the former. He had always come there by boat; in a short time the watermen would cease to ply, and he had not the faintest idea how to find his way home over the bridge. He could avoid Dick that night, and be off again after Desmond the first thing in the morning.

This resolution was taken just in time. As he gained the river-side he met the last waterman marching homeward with his sculls on his shoulder, and had to give him about five times his proper fare to induce him to make the trip.

Father Thames was clean in those days. He had forget-me-nots at Wapping and water lilies off the Isle of Dogs. His receding tides left gold bright sand and glittering pebbles, where they now deposit black mud, old shoes, and the surplus feline population. Salmon was caught at Isleworth, and the good folks of Greenwich could drink of his waters. But he was not doing much business then. Some twenty ships were anchored off the Tower—the largest barely of eighty tons; no tall chimneys vomited smoke, sulphurous

acid and the *bouquet* of bone-crushing. No line of light marked the profile of his shores.

All was dark and silent as Cosmo took his seat in the wherry, and its unwilling rower shoved off into the stream. Three parts of the passage was quickly made, and then they got into trouble. A vessel was anchored right in their way. The rower tried to pass her by the bow, but he miscalculated his distance in the dark, or the tide was too strong for him, or he was too tired after a long day's work to cope with it. He fouled her chain, and snap went his right hand scull.

In an instant the stream whisked the wherry round, and sent her stern foremost under the vessel's side.

"Hold on!" shouted the waterman. "Hold on for your life."

Cosmo obeyed mechanically; clutched a dead eye of the main rigging, and brought the boat up. Scarcely had he done so when another order came; from the ship this time.

"Cast off—you! Cast off or I'll sink ye."

"Hold on!" again shouted the waterman to Cosmo.

"Why comrade!" he continued to the man who now appeared on the bulwark with a huge lump of ballast, with which to carry out his threat, in his hand. "D'ye take us for thieves?"

"You've no business here, shove off."

"Yes, and get swamped at the bridge! I've broken one of my sculls—that's all."

The man lowered his missile, somewhat mollified and the other went on:—

"Thou dost keep a good watch, partner." This was intended as a compliment, but only produced a surly

"What is that to thee! Art going?"

"Aye, an thou wilt lend me a scull. I'm a licensed waterman, John Trumble, at your service. I'll bring it back in the morning."

"I've none to lend."

"Then sell us one, the gentleman will pay."

The last four words had become familiar to Cosmo, who pricked up his ears and added.

"Oh ya—as, I pay—good."

"A foreigner!" cried the man of the ship with a start as Cosmo spoke, and again lifting his chunk of ballast when the latter rose. "Keep back! Make one step to get on board and by God I'll brain thee."

He was diverted by a hand laid on him from behind, and a voice which whispered "What is this?"

"A shore boat," he replied in the same tone. "Pretend they've broken a scull, and want to get on board. Hark'ye, Master Willford—one of them's a foreigner."

"Ha! let me speak to them."

"Be careful. If *he* should hear!"

"Hold thy tongue. It is thou who will rouse him with thy loud talk and cursing. Now, sir," he said to Cosmo taking the other's place "what would'st thou?"

"A scull an't please ye," replied the waterman. "The gentleman don't understand much English. I broke one of mine on your chain and this tide would have me under the bridge in a jiffey, if I don't get another."

"Give him one, and let them go," said Willford, and it was handed over the side.

"I shall know the ship again I daresay," quoth the waterman, "but you'd better give me her name."

"It matters not," Willford replied.

"Well then thine, or the captain's?"

"Give thee good night."

"Blame me not if thou seest no more of thy scull then," said Trumble.

"Keep it and welcome, good fellow; only trouble me no more, it is late and I am weary."

As they passed under the stern they heard a cry from the cabin, and the sound of a scuffle. Then all was silent again.

"There's something wrong over there," said John Trumble with a jerk of his head towards the ship, as Cosmo jumped ashore, "but it's no business of mine."

"How is she call?" asked Cosmo in his broken English.

"I not know," the waterman replied, thinking to be best understood by adopting the same patois.

"I will pay for him," pointing to the odd scull.

"They no want pay. They give—Master Willford, give."

"Master Willford!" cried Cosmo in surprise.

"Aye, that's what the other fellow called him. I heard he's master there, and they're up to no good. He was too civil by half, and his man too saucy, to be honest. Honest folks don't give away things to strangers for nothing. They don't want me to go back with this 'ere—that's it."

Cosmo made his way back to Lombard Street, and found lights burning in the counting-house, though it was long after the usual time for closing that department.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAN WHO SHRIEKS AT NIGHT.

LIGHTS were burning in the counting-house, and Dick and his uncle were there, not busy, but plunged in thought.

To explain this phenomena, we must go back to the time when Cosmo left. He had hardly gained the street when the goldsmith bustled in, and wanted to know what was the matter.

"Nothing," said Dick.

"Nothing! Dost shout like that for nothing? Dost look as red as an angry turkey-cock for nothing? Thou hast been quarrelling with my guest: thou hast offended him."

"Mayhap."

"Mayhap! Marry-come-up! Mayhap! How darest thou?"

"Uncle," pleaded Dick, "bear with me. If thou didst know all, thou wouldst not blame me."

Dick was not red-faced now, and there was a tremor in his voice which disarmed Martin Earle.

"Out with it, my boy," he said, kindly, laying his hand upon Dick's shoulder. "I have never been hard with thee, and shall not begin now. I am thine uncle and master; I can be more—make me thy friend. Is't money or a woman, Dick?"

"Both; but not in the way thou dost hint. That man who was here with thee this morning is at the root of it."

"Master Willford! Dost know him?"

"Aye; that is, I know of him. Uncle, he is one of Hugh Desmond's worst enemies. It was he who had him accused of witchcraft." And having thus broken the ice, Dick went on to tell all he had heard from Desmond himself and from Gregory Denys on the subject.

"A knave—a very knave," mused the goldsmith, half to himself; "but he has warrant for what he seeks."

"Hugh Desmond's inheritance?"

"Who told thee that?"

"I did but guess."

"Thou art a shrewd guesser. Thou art right. His possessions revert to the crown, as he left no kin."

"I am not sure of that," said Dick.

"Wiser heads than thine are; mine for one. I have read the sworn depositions," said the goldsmith.

"That Master Desmond left no kin? Wilt say who made them?" asked the 'prentice, eagerly.

"To begin with, four of his father's oldest friends, who——"

"Pshaw! What know they of him?"

Dick interrupted.

"Patience, malapert! When the last of his brothers died, and he was no one knew where, those friends often heard the old man say that he was the last of his blood—that there was no Desmond left. Now dost understand? When the wanderer returned, they also heard his father beg him to marry, that he might see a grandchild before he died. He never did. Hugh would not wed. All this is proved, and Master Willford is appointed the king's receiver. But what has this to do with the Viscount and thee?"

"Uncle, we had strange adventures upon our travels. Thou knowest that we encountered Master Desmond. We found him where none who knew him thought he dwelt. We saw what he would fain have hidden from all the world, but could not from us."

"Methinks I understand," said Martin Earle, shading his eyes with his hand. "Poor woman! poor woman! Were there children, Dick?"

"Two."

"Young children?"

"Almost babies."

"Poor little things! Well, they have their mother," sighed Earle.

"She is dead."

"Dick! Oh! Dick, why didst not tell me this before?" cried the goldsmith.

"Who has cared for them?"

"They are in no present need," Dick replied; "but thou wilt see her—thou wilt see them righted?"

"They are sinless, but must bear the consequence of their parents' sin," said Earle, sadly. "In the eye of the law they have no father."

"But their inheritance——"

"My good Dick, they have none. But again I ask, why shouldst thou and Signor de Ribolini quarrel over this?"

"Ask him," said Dick. "Nay" (seeing that his uncle was nettled at this apparently disrespectful reply), "I would answer thee if I might. He, too, is pledged to secrecy, but less bounden than I am, because——Oh Lord! oh Lord! I cannot explain without telling the whole story. Good uncle, ask him to unloose my tongue."

"Why, how can I?"

"Let me ask him *for* you. If he will, you shall know all."

"And if he refuse?"

"I'll forswear myself," groaned the 'prentice; "it's the lesser of two evils, and the only way out of the maze."

I have said that Cosmo de Ribolini was sorry for having spoken so sharply to Dick, because he felt that he was right. Dick, on his side, had no regrets for the strong language he had used, and looked forward with pleasure to the further opportunity which was now presented for giving the Italian another piece of his mind; because he persuaded himself that Cosmo was not true.

Now that Sweetheart and her husband were no more, he wanted to hush up their marriage. Perhaps he would take care of little Maria, adopt her, or something of the sort; but this was not enough for Dick. He was young, you see, and very British. The idea that the child of an Englishman should be deprived of her name, and a slur thrown upon her parents; to pander to the

pride of a foreigner, made his blood boil. Young British blood does not boil now-a-days—it isn't good form—and in this respect, I fancy, the *good old times* had the best of it.

So they waited up for Cosmo, and the goldsmith had begun to fear that he had been driven from the house by Dick's rudeness, when in he came.

Dick had carefully prepared what he had to say, and having risen and made a profound obeisance, intended to be very cutting, began:—

"Most excellent signor, my uncle here wishes to address thee, and has perforce to do so through my interpretation. Have the condescension, therefore, to consider that he is speaking, and not I; and to reply to him, and not to me. Without understanding what passed between us this morning, thy sudden departure and the sound of my voice led him to believe that we had been in dispute. Will it please your excellency to inform him what was the cause of our difference?"

"Let it pass, good Dick," whispered Cosmo. "Let it pass. We were both wrong, and both mean well."

"I will answer for one," Dick replied stiffly.

"In the name of God! why take this tone with me," muttered the other. "Thou wilt repent this."

"Threats are no use, Signor de Ribolini."

"What does he say?" demanded the goldsmith.

"I mean no threat," replied Cosmo. "You will repent this, because it brings into peril the interest of those whom in thine honest, but wrong-headed way, thou wouldst serve."

"Will he explain?" asked Martin Earle, getting impatient.

"What says thy uncle?" demanded Cosmo.

Poor Dick! Like M. Jourdin's housemaid, Cosmo fenced contrary to all rule. He ought to have fallen back upon his dignity, and haughtily declined to be catechised. Then Dick would have said,—

"I consider, most excellent, that Master Desmond's death, and your refusal to do

justice to his children and his memory, releases me from the promise I made. Therefore——" and he would have told all he knew.

Cosmo had no right to come in with his "Let it pass, good Dick." *Good Dick!* indeed, and he as mad with him as one man can be with another!

Thus thrown out, perplexed, angry with himself for being angry, assailed by a cross fire of, "What does he say?" alternately in English and Italian, plucked at one sleeve by his impatient uncle to "answer this directly," and at the other by Cosmo to "explain for the love of God," he presented anything but a spectacle of dignity. Indeed, the situation was fast drifting into the ludicrous—as a situation will where of three actors, one is spluttering with rage, one struck stupid, and one does not understand what it all means.

From such a climax Cosmo rescued it.

"This must end," he said firmly. "Tell thine uncle, and mark well thyself the last words I shall speak to-night on this subject. Give me till noon to-morrow, and I will fully satisfy both. I will answer him then, and I will explain to thee why I may not do so now. I ask this for Desmond's sake—not for any purpose of mine own."

"But Willford will be here at noon," observed the goldsmith, when the ultimatum had been translated.

"Whatever happens, that man must be delayed," said Cosmo. "I saw him to-night."

"Indeed!" said Dick, getting suspicious, "where?"

"On board a ship in the river."

"Why, he lodges at the 'Bell,' in 'Cheap!'"

"Art sure?"

"So mine uncle told me."

"Hast thine uncle seen him there?"

Referred to Martin Earle, the reply to this question was in the negative, and then came the inevitable "What does he say?" which had better be left out for the future, and the rest of this conversation given as it was understood.

"I regret," Cosmo said, "that this man must be delayed. There is something

dark going on in the ship he appears to command. Why should Master Willford of Manchester—the King's receiver—who gives us his abiding place a hostel in this city, be passing the night on board a ship in the river?"

"Did he recognize thee?"

"No, for we never met before."

"How, then, canst say he is the man?"

"He was addressed as Master Willford."

"'Tis not an uncommon name."

"No? Well, we can quickly see if there be two of them. Wilt help me?"

"Willingly," replied Dick. "What shall I do?"

"Come with me to the 'Bell,' and ask if he be there."

"'Tis late."

"The better for that. An he really lodge there, he will surely be in at this hour."

"Right. And if he be, we can state as an excuse for our visit, that mine uncle would fain postpone their meeting for a day."

"I don't see what you gain by that," said the goldsmith.

Cosmo mused for a while, and then answered—

"I can tell thee this much, good Master Earle: not one stiver that ever belonged to Desmond should pass into this man's hands, and we must lose no chance for finding some weapon to fight him withal—delay, if he be not what I think, or fear of exposure if there exist a mystery on board that ship with which we can connect him."

The "Bell" in 'Cheap was kept by a buxom widow named Franklin, with whom handsome Dick was a favorite. Late as it was, she not only excused the invasion, but chided him for not having been to see her lately, brought out a flask of her best wine, and made her visitors welcome.

"Is Master Willford in?" she echoed, as Dick, having felt his way to his point, put the enquiry—"Ah! I thought thou didst not come for nothing."

"I came to show my friend here the handsomest hostess in London," said the gallant 'prentice; "but may not one ask a question?"

"Go to, flatterer! No; Master Willford takes a meal here now and again, but has not slept in the house since he carried the poor gentleman away."

"What poor gentleman?"

"Why, his friend who is"—here she tapped her forehead.

"I see," said Dick: "out of his mind. Whither did he take him?"

"Nay, I know not. 'Tis no business of mine, and I was glad enough to be rid of him."

"'Tis not pleasant to have a madman in the house."

"Oh, poor creature! he gave little trouble. Shrieked out in his sleep sometimes, but in the main was quiet enough. I was right sorry for him. I hope Master Willford will send him back to his friends."

"At Manchester?"

"Lord, Dick! what would be the good of that? He comes all the way from Italy."

"From Italy!"

"Aye; his companion wanted to make him out a Spaniard, but I know better."

"How came they together?"

"Master Willford met him on the road, and took charge of him in charity. He would not admit that he was crazy at first, and—Lord! Lord! what a turn it gave me when I found it out."

"By his shrieking a-nights?" asked Dick.

"No. We were talking together in this very room one night. He speaks English well for a foreigner, and seemed quite rational till the clock struck eight. All of a sudden his face changed: 'She's coming!' he said—looking, oh! so wild; and then he began to talk in his own language to nothing that I could see; but I tell thee it made my blood run cold!"

"Was Willford present?"

"No; and when he did come, I gave him my mind pretty freely—bringing a madman like that into an honest woman's house! I didn't know he was harmless then, and was for throwing them out presently."

"But you didn't."

"Willford spoke me fair, and overpersuaded me; promised to take him away as soon as a place of disposal could be found: and they left last Monday."

"A strange story!" said Dick. "May I tell it to my friend?"

She assented, and it was told. Then that shriek and scuffle on board the ship flashed back upon Cosmo's mind. The madman was there, and Willford was his keeper. Who was he? An Italian, under the delusion that he was haunted by the spirit of a woman who appeared at eight o'clock at night. Why at eight o'clock?

"When he spoke, you say, so wildly," asked Dick, after a conference aside with Cosmo, "did he call the woman he thought he saw by any name?"

"None that I could catch," replied Mistress Franklin. "He spoke in Italian."

"How canst tell, not understanding him? Might it not have been Spanish? Willford said that he was a Spaniard."

"And I tell thee I know better, Master Dick."

"What difference could it make? Why should he deceive thee?" persisted the 'prentice.

"I know not: there is some mystery about him."

"There is indeed. If thou would'st but say frankly why thou dost persist he is from Italy."

"Bless the boy! Because he told me so."

"In his sane moments?"

"When he was as rational as art thou now."

"Good Mistress Franklin," said Dick, "I will not conceal from thee that what thou hast told us touches my friend nearly. He is from Italy, and is seeking a kinsman who disappeared not far from Manchester."

"Was he out of his mind?" she asked.

"No; not when last heard of."

"How long ago was that?"

"About a month."

"Willford said that this man had been so for years."

"Also that he was a Spaniard—which thou dost not believe. The other tale may be false, too," urged Dick. "If your late guest be the man we seek, Master Willford has no right to control him, and can only seek to do so for some evil end."

"Vastly fine! Others may have evil

ends, too," said the hostess, with a meaning glance towards Cosmo. "Have a care, Dick, that thou burnest not thy fingers in others' quarrels. Hearken!—this for thine own ear. The poor gentleman told me that he was persecuted, hunted from place to place by a kinsman, aided by a man whom he holds in the utmost dread."

"A common delusion," Dick said.

"I don't believe it is a delusion at all, Dick. Willford heard him say so, and added for himself, 'So you see, Mistress Frankland, we want to remain as quiet as possible.' What is he called?" she asked, quickly, as though struck by a sudden thought, and indicating Cosmo.

"Signor Pietri," replied Dick.

"That was not the name he mentioned."

"Dost remember what it was?" asked the 'prentice.

"Well; 'twas Cosmo de Ribolini."

"And the other man—he who aids him—what is his name?" cried Dick.

"Hugh Desmond," replied the hostess.

• CHAPTER XVIII.

MAD!

YES, Vincenti de la Torre was mad! His mind had been bent in one direction, preyed upon by one idea for years, but in his darkest moments, his gloomiest moods, no desire for revenge upon the girl whom, in his way, he had loved, and who had sought refuge from him in the arms of another, entered it. Nor did he allow himself to consider that in killing Desmond he would take the sunshine out of her life. If Desmond had fifty lives he could have slain him fifty times, and felt no regret, but not a hair of her head would he have injured. It was really more to provide for her future, than for the reason he gave in his letter to the old count, that he desired Cosmo's presence in England. He knew how this brother and sister loved one another. He had no fear that Cosmo would be hard upon her. It could be so arranged that she should not be aware of his complicity in her husband's execution, and so would naturally accept his protec-

tion. The dark cloud which came over Vincenti when he found that the young noble was false to his mission, had its glint of silver lining reflected from this very cause. She would have her brother to provide for her when Desmond should fall. We know what befel his long-laid plans—how his vengeance was averted. The shot which killed Sweetheart inflicted a mortal wound upon his reason. By a strange fatality he owed his life to the suspension of the faculties which had often protected it. Stunned with horror, he rushed back into the house, where Gregory headed him in the wood. This was the last place in which, had he been in possession of his senses, he would have sought to hide, but it so happened that it was the last place which his pursuers thought of searching. During their absence he somewhat recovered from the shock; released Marco; stole little Hugh out of his cot; and escaped. If Cosmo had not lost his way, he would have encountered him.

His reason had received a mortal wound, but like some injuries from which there is no recovery, it did not seem severe when the first sting had passed off. This—if he had but known it—was the worst sign. In time there came others which he could not ignore. The clock had struck eight the moment before he fired, and every night at that hour the *horror* came back upon him, dimly at first, but gaining vividness at each repetition. He was going mad, *and he knew it!* His mania was of that class—well understood now—in which the sane and the insane thought run side by side; not in parallel lines, but at an angle which must sooner or later lead them to converge in absolute madness. Like one who struggles on the verge of a precipice, and feels the branches to which he clings slowly but surely giving way with his weight, and fully realizing the utter destruction which awaits him when they shall break, and his weakening hold upon them relax—he fought with his delusion, and knew that his strength to resist it was failing—failing—failing. The horror which at one time lasted but for a few minutes, now remained with him all night. The

day was coming when it would never leave him.

His great dread was that Desmond would find him when under its influence. Vincenti *sane* tortured himself with conjectures as to what would become of Vincenti *mad* in the presence of the man he had desolated. This alone was hurrying on the end, until the news of Desmond's death, which enabled him to revisit Manchester and put him in the power of Master Willford, relieved him.

He had parted with Marco whilst he could yet bear to be alone, and soon began to cling to the witch-finder with almost child-like dependence, but had sufficient cunning left to avoid anything like a confession of the cause of his terrors. He never told him that he was haunted by the spirit of a woman at eight o'clock, nor could his companion gather the truth from his cries at night and mutterings in his sleep. It mattered little to Willford what was preying on his mind; what did matter was to find out all he knew about Desmond's affairs, and to get possession of those papers abstracted from the old brew-house, which tended to show that what he said on the subject was not founded on delusion.

Little by little he gained his point; found out about the deposit made with Martin Earle, and the house and land in Staffordshire, but by this time Vincenti's darkening intellect was thrown off its guard, and the plotter learned that this wealth was not for him. Desmond had left a son!

This discovery might have daunted a smaller villain—it only suggested one more possible difficulty to Stephen Willford. I say "possible difficulty," because, according to Vincenti's story, the child had been carried off with instructions to obliterate every trace of his identity. Who knew of his existence? Not Martin Earle, or he would have mentioned it when the claim of the Crown for Desmond's property became known to him. Not Dame Martha, for she was dead. Who would assert the boy's legitimacy? Not Cosmo de Ribolini, for he made no sign. Perhaps, mused the Witch-finder, this is only a new delusion.

At all events, he resolved to treat it as one.

Having no further use for the wretched Vincenti, the next thing to be done was to get rid of him. For a consideration he induced the captain of the ship we know of to take charge of him, and to lose him at some distant port when his mind should have entirely given way, and no one would be likely to heed what he might say.

In order to hasten this end, he was represented as a dangerous lunatic, and treated accordingly—chained in the dark, starved, beaten. That was the way in which the mentally affected were kept quiet in the *good old days*. Perhaps he might never reach that distant port.

* * * * *

Master Willford was punctual at his appointment with the goldsmith, and quickly detected that there was something wrong.

Could the jovial old fellow, who was sitting back in his chair, his face radiant with smiles, and a chuckle running all over him, from his toes to the roots of his hair, be the grave merchant who with dim eyes and softened voice had conversed with him about Hugh Desmond—his good friend departed—yesterday? Master Willford could not make it out. Moreover, the goldsmith made no sign of going forth with him, of retiring to a private room, or dismissing the two men whom he had found in his company; but sat there talking about things in general in the best of humors. Now Master Willford knew perfectly well that Hugh Desmond's savings were in Earle's own hands; and his knowledge of human nature did not teach him that people give up such deposits at short notice, and in the best of humors. The conversation—which turned upon the new practice of smoking tobacco—was animated. The goldsmith laughed to scorn the idea that any pleasure was to be obtained from drawing the smoke of old leaves into one's mouth and puffing it out again; while Dick took the practical view—confessed that he had indulged in a pipe, and found it soothing. The subject did not interest Master Willford, and when it began to flag he touched the goldsmith's

arm, and with a meaning glance towards Dick and Cosmo said in a half whisper,

"When I saw thee yesterday, good sir, it was my fortune to find thee alone."

"Aye, Dick was busy. Dick here is my nephew and my 'prentice, Master Willford. Knows all my business as well as I know it myself. A young head, but a shrewd one if he muddle it not with the fumes of Sir Walter's Virginia weed. Thou mayest speak frankly before Dick, and this fair gentleman (a foreigner, who honors my poor house by making it his home during his too brief sojourn here). He does not understand our language; I would he did, for he is a good friend of Master Desmond; so also is Dick—both good friends."

"It pleases me to hear that he had friends," Willford replied.

"*Had!*" repeated Martin Earle. "Say *has*. Once a *good* friend always a good friend. Friendship and sound wine improve by age."

"Mayhap this gentleman (intimating Cosmo) is he to whom thou didst make allusion yesterday, as one who could tell where the estate of the deceased is disposed?" insinuated Willford.

"Enough of this," replied Earle, with a cheerful wave of his hand. "Thou hast made a great mistake, Master receiver—honestly, I hope. Desmond is no more dead than thou art."

The cold grey of the Witchfinder's face deepened for a moment.

"I am here on the King's business, Master Earle," he said sternly. "I pray thee spare thy jests."

"Jests! I' faith, there is no jest unless it be of thy making—coming here after the estate of an honest gentleman before it has pleased God Almighty to take the breath out of his mouth!" retorted the goldsmith with some warmth.

Willford made no immediate reply. He sat for some moments irresolute. Twice he made as though to speak, and twice he checked himself. Then his face curdled into the nearest approach to a smile that it was capable of assuming, and drawing his chair nearer to Martin Earle, he said,

"We are both men of the world; let us be frank with each other. I know that

thou hast some fifty thousand crowns which belonged to Desmond in thine hands; and 'tis easy to comprehend that so large a sum—invested perchance in thy business—may not suddenly be withdrawn without inconvenience. Fear not, good Master Earle. Those who act in this matter will not be hard on thee. Thou shalt have time. Thou shalt have thy charges. Accounts from such a man as thee will require no scrutiny. Thy simple word will pass. What canst ask more! Go to! go to! Why didst thou not treat me frankly, instead of making an idle excuse which can avail thee nothing, and would bring thy good fame in peril."

"Speak of what thou dost understand, Master Witchfinder!" roared Dick, furious at the insinuation conveyed against his master. "The good fame of Martin Earle is out of thy reach."

"Hush Dick—hold thy peace, my boy," said his uncle, kindly. "I was perchance to blame, sir," he continued, addressing Willford, "in that I told thee of my friend being yet alive, without due gravity. I had only just heard the news myself, and was glad—very glad. I was too happy to be grave, and thou art excused for deeming that I jested. Believe me, I am in sober earnest now. I tell thee, Master Willford—I, Martin Earle, citizen and goldsmith, master of my guild, and one who (an his neighbors do not flatter him) will be Lord Mayor of this city if he live two years—I tell thee that malgre all thy depositions, thy proceedings and thy judgments to the contrary; Hugh Desmond *did not* perish in the fire of his house, and was alive yesterday."

Earnest words these, and delivered with much dignity.

Dick jumped up, slapped his thigh, and confronted Master Willford with the—"now then! what can you say to that?"—air of the triumphant. But he saw no trace of discomfiture on the countenance of the witchfinder. Honest Martin Earle had said too much. In his anxiety to clear up everything he had made an admission in the commencement of his speech, which took all the force out of its conclusion.

"You are a solid man and true," Will-

ford replied. "I doubt not thy honesty or thy word, but, good sir, thou dost not speak of thine own knowledge. Yesterday thou hadst no doubt of Desmond's death. Thou dost admit having only just heard the news that he is—as some one has told thee—alive. Who is thine informant? How came he by his news? Above all, if the man be living where is he? The proceedings taken on behalf of his Majesty (whom heaven preserve!) have not been taken in the dark. Due proclamation has been made—all proper notice given. Again I say, where is Desmond?"

"He is living in Southwark," Dick replied; for the goldsmith had fallen back in his seat, and had cast a half-puzzled, half-appealing look at him. "This gentleman" (indicating Cosmo) "was returning from his lodging, when thou wast so good as to give him a scull in place of one broken by the waterman who rowed him. He hopes that his afflicted countryman, whom thou hast in charge, passed a tranquil night."

Willford's panoply of cunning and caution could not resist this shot. It went home, through and through, and struck him speechless—stunned him, so that it was some time before he perceived that his question had been evaded.

"I rejoice," he muttered, with pale, dry lips, "at having been of service to a friend of this house. For the rest, it is a painful subject: let it pass. I pray thee to satisfy me on the point more germane to my business. Did the gentleman to whom I gave the scull know of my visit here yesterday, and of its object?"

"He knew of this visit and guessed its object," Dick answered.

"Ha! And said nothing?"

"He had not permission to say anything; on the contrary, he was bound to silence."

"By Desmond himself?"

"By Desmond himself," repeated Dick.

"The purport of his visit, therefore, was to inform that person of what was going on?"

"Most assuredly it was."

"A friendly act," said Willford, with a sigh of relief, "and well timed. Why, an I had persisted yesterday, thy good master

might have made over to me these monies out of hand! Was this gentleman (whose name I have not the honor of knowing) aware that I was to return to-day and claim them?"

"He thought that there was no time to be lost," said Dick; "and he was right."

"May I venture to ask how Master Desmond accounts for his taking no steps to gainsay the rumor of his death?"

"Thou canst ask him thyself."

"I would fain do so," said Willford. "Where is he?"

"That he will make known at his pleasure," Dick replied after a slight pause, in which Willford's quick sense detected hesitation and uneasiness.

"Doubtless I weary thee, good youth, with this questioning. Remember that the law exacts a shrewd account from such as I, and bear with me. Say frankly—as is thy nature—dost *thou* vouch that Desmond lives?"

"Aye; that do I."

"Upon thine own knowledge?"

"I do, upon my soul, believe it."

"But thy belief is based on trust in others?"

"Well, an' they be honest, what then?" said Dick, stoutly.

"The most honest may be mistaken, Master 'Prentice. The honest, the more liable to be deceived. Briefly, then, thou hast no knowledge of thine own, and can say no more than what this foreigner has told thee."

"That is enough for me; but I have other proof—the people of the house in which Desmond lodges."

"Ha! thou hast also been there?"

Dick assented.

"Not last night?"

Dick assented, with more quickness than he had as yet shown.

"Thou wast not in the boat. Thou hast been there together this day."

"What if I have?" Dick retorted.

"This," said Willford triumphantly: "neither thou nor this stranger have seen Hugh Desmond."

"Easily said," sneered Dick; but he turned deadly pale.

"As easily proved," Willford rejoined.

"If this stranger had seen him last night, one of two things would have happened—either there would have been no need for a further visit, or Desmond would have tarried in to-day to receive it. Thou didst not see him nor yesterday nor to-day, or thou wouldst not have given for what thou wert pleased to call thy 'proof' the people of the house in which—as thou pretendest—he doth lodge. Master Earle, have a care! Thou art deceived. Thou hast heard what I have just said to this youth. He cannot answer me. Look upon him! The Lord has assisted me to baffle this plot—blessed be his name! Get thee out of it, good Master Earle; shake its dust from thy garments, and no blame shall fall on thee. Thou hast been cozened. Fie! thou a master of thy guild, and one who may be lord mayor! 'Tis a shame, 'tis a pity!"

"To the devil with thy pity, and thee!" cried the goldsmith in a fury. "Hugh Desmond lives, though we cannot find him at this moment, and will confront thee yet."

"As I supposed," said Willford, with a sardonic smile. "It grieves me that thou shouldst take this tone, Master Earle. Thou wilt think better of it upon consideration. Take council of thy *friends*. This," gathering up his papers and rising, "must now go into the hands of those who will not, perchance, be as easy as I might have been."

"Stop," cried Dick; "give us three days to prove that Desmond lives."

"No; nor three hours."

"Come with us to his lodgings, then, and satisfy thyself. Thou dost hesitate. Ah! then thou dost not believe in thine own base imputations."

"I will go with thee," he replied. "I will leave thee no excuse."

Down to the river they went—Cosmo, Dick, and Master Willford; and on the hard whom should they encounter but John Trumble, the waterman, who drew Dick aside, and said—

"Hast any business with that ship thou wast asking about this morning?"

"You said that she had sailed."

"So she did; but she was stopped at Greenwich, and came back with the tide."

"Why? Who stopped her?"

"I don't rightly know, but there's a rare coil aboard. There she lies, with the warden's boat alongside; so take warning if thou hast hand in the trouble."

"Nay, 'tis no affair of mine," Dick replied; "but I would fain learn what it means. Say not a word, but row us to her as though it were on our way across."

To inland-born Master Willford one ship was just like another. The only vessel in which he was interested had left the port (as he supposed), and was well on her way down the Thames. It did not therefore concern him to find that they were passing close by a ship with half-furled sails, until a voice hailed him in excited tones, shouting—

"I am seized! I am ruined Master Willford. They have taken my ship!"

"Upon whose authority?" gasped the witch-finder.

"On mine," replied a calm, deep voice from the poop.

The speaker was Hugh Desmond.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GOOD SAMARITAN.

YOU can guess now why Hugh Desmond was not to be found at his lodgings. The clue which accident had revealed to Cosmo, he had discovered by long and patient search amongst the shipping in the port and the sea-faring people on shore. Half a sailor himself, he knew well how to gain the confidence and loosen the tongues of men of the sea. From sunrise to sunset he was amongst them, listening to their yarns, spinning yarns of his own, and cautiously pushing his inquiries.

The clue was but a slight one, after all. A crazy foreigner had been taken on board a certain ship, whose skipper did not bear the best of characters. No more! The man he sought was not crazy, so far as he knew; but then, madness might be assumed as a *ruse*. He worked on the back trail of that crazy foreigner like a hungry sleuth-hound, till he found out who he was. He had succeeded at last. He had the murderer of Sweetheart—the robber

of her boy in his hands at last; and despair seized him. He was powerless. He could not fight a madman—he could not kill a madman—he could not ask a madman, “Where is my child?”

Well, there was yet hope. The man Mareo might be mixed up in this, and *he* was sane.

He could find no trace of Marco. His enemy, the Manchester witch-finder, was the man who had ridden into London with Vincenti de la Torre, who had put him on board that ship, and who had given its master instructions how he was to be dealt with when she sailed. But why Willford? What interest had he in spiriting the witch away? This puzzled Desmond at first, but eventually gave him the pretext he required for stopping the ship. He swore out an information against the Captain for kidnapping, just in the nick of time. He took one constable, for form’s sake, and half-a-dozen sailors, willing for what we should now call the “lark of the thing” to help him; and in about four minutes that ship was boarded, her crew battened down below, and her captain a prisoner, in the best buccaneering style, with a loss of some ounce or so of blood, chiefly from the nose.

At first the captain stoutly denied having any passenger on board. His cargo was lawful, his papers were in order. He would have the law on them all for detaining him. Desmond paid no attention to his expostulations or his threats, but made straight for his cabin in the stern, unfastened the screws which held his cot to the bulwark, threw aside some sacking which covered the deck underneath, disclosed a trap-door, raised it, and descended into the dark hold below.

There he found what he sought.

They had taken a broad plank and bound the wretched madman by his middle to its midst with six turns of a stout rope. They had driven four strong iron spikes into the edge of the plank—two above and two below—and to these had lashed his wrists and ankles. *At the lower end they had fastened a fifty pound shot.* And there they had left him, gagged, in the darkness, in the stench of the bilge water, in the

suffocating heat of that dismal hole, until the time and the place should be arrived at when that shot should carry him down to the bottom of the sea! Dead, if death came to his rescue; living, if need be.

Thus was Vincenti de la Torre found by the man who had been hunting him for vengeance! Emaciated, filthy, blood oozing from ears and nostrils, cut by the lashings he had vainly tried to break, almost at his last gasp of foul air, *but sane*, he found him!

It was best to lift him as he lay, first casting loose the shot, and to carry him, plank and all, to the upper air. With his own hands Desmond removed the gag and cut the lashings, and so weak was the wretch that, deprived of their support, he collapsed a helpless heap upon the deck, muttering, “Water! for the love of God, water!”

Desmond filled the ship’s pannikin, and held it to his lips.

The draught and the fresh river breeze revived him. He recognized his deliverer, as a wild beast caught in a trap sees the hunter who has set it come up with his dogs. But gradually the look of horror, hatred, and despair faded from his face, and an almost childish expression of wonder filled it.

“Why do *you* do this?” he whispered.

Ah, why, indeed? Desmond could not answer, but turned aside and left him to the charge of the crew, now released. Let me do them justice. They had come on board at the last moment before sailing, and were not aware of *this* part of the cargo. There was no difficulty now about bringing back the ship. Her seamen, who at first seemed disposed to resist the authorities, soon sided with them. They would not sail with such a ——— pirate. Upon this the “pirate” (qualifying adjective suppressed) gave in, and split upon his master.

How was he, a poor mariner, to know that the gentleman (meaning Willford) had not the law on his side? They had put the crazy man down there to keep him quiet whilst the ship was getting ready for sea, that was all. No harm was meant him, but he was so violent. And the

shot—well, he called heaven and all its saints to witness that he had not put it there.

Now in swearing out that information, Hugh Desmond deposed that Willford had no right to the custody or control of the alleged madman, and that he was being sent out of the realm without the knowledge or consent of his nearest relative in this country, and head of his family abroad, the Count de Ribolini, and this person Desmond pledged himself to produce within an hour of the ship's return to London.

As good luck would have it, he was able to produce him much sooner; and not only him, but the principal in the kidnapping, good Master Willford.

The Warden had not been on board ten minutes when all the parties were before him, and Desmond's statement substantiated to the very letter.

Such a complete break up of his schemes was not to be realized all at once by even so astute a plotter as the Manchester Witch-finder. He knew not how much had been discovered, but the appearance of Hugh Desmond on the scene gave him clearly to understand that a change of tactics was required. So as soon as Dick stopped the boat and insisted upon all going on board, he assumed the injured innocent. Accused of kidnapping! Heavens! what an indignity! What a reward for his charity to a poor unfortunate, without kith or kin to help him! He had found him on the road, out of his mind, had taken care of him, lodged him, fed him, provided him at his own expense (here he gave a meaning look at the captain) with a passage home to his country and friends, and this they called kidnapping! "Ah!" he moaned piously, "it is a punishment for my sins! 'Whom the Lord loveth he chastiseth!' Verily, there rose a hard thought in my heart, that I would ne'er play the good Samaritan again. But I do repent me of it; I am in the hands of the Lord. I will do the Lord's work. I am not afraid of what man may do unto me; but have a care! have a care, I say! I am the king's officer, and the bishop's."

These last words, somewhat inconsistent

with the holy resignation which had marked the commencement of the sentence, were spoken from white lips and a shrinking form, for Desmond, who had been aside with Cosmo, came forward somewhat suddenly, and confronted him. His fears were groundless. Desmond was not going to strike him—at least, not with his hands—or to cause him any bodily harm. On the contrary, he was going to build him a golden bridge of escape out of the clutches of Master Warden and the constables.

"Most Christian sir," he began, with a low bow, "'twould be sad indeed if such charity as thou hast rendered should not meet with its reward. Doubt not, good sir, that thy conduct will surely be rewarded here or hereafter. But forgive me, if I say that thou hast committed some errors. A man—no matter what his condition may be—is not to be hustled out of this realm with less warrant than is due for a bale of merchandise. Eh, Master Warden? Now, hast thou attempted even to find some friends or fellow-countrymen of the poor soul to whom thou hast been the good Samaritan, or, failing these, hadst warned some justice of what thou didst propose to do, all might have been well. Am I right, Master Warden? Good! It only remains, therefore, for this gentleman—a nobleman of Italy, and the nearest of kin to Signor Porras in this country, to relieve thee of thy charge, and also to withdraw the more serious accusation which has been made—not by us, I pray thee mark—not by us, but by this somewhat excited Master Mariner—against thee; to repay thee the monies of which thou hast spoken, and to bid thee—an Master Warden so wills it—go in peace."

"Vastly fine!" replied Willford, upon whom the fine irony of Desmond's words was lost, and who only saw in their calm what he took for weakness. "Vastly fine! but let me also tell thee that in this realm false accusations——"

He had got thus far when the captain passed close beside him, and whispered in his ear—

"Hist! He knows all. Submit, or you are lost."

"That is precisely," Willford resumed,

but with a shade less confidence in his tone, "what I was about to say. Thou" (to the captain) "art the most offended, and if *thou* art content—well let it be as this worthy gentleman desires. *I* (thanks be to the Lord) am too well known—*my* character amongst men is too high, for such a charge, so lightly made, to injure me. My friends" (holding up his hands as though giving his benediction) "I forgive you—all. May God soften your hearts, so that you may see, and praise His works. I have cast my bread upon the waters, and it will return to me. Was not something said of money? I have expended some forty crowns, less the sum paid for my afflicted friend's passage in this ship, and which—as perchance he will not be allowed to go in her—this honest mariner will refund. But this is between ourselves," he added, as he saw a look upon the honest mariner's face which he did not like, "and need not trouble you."

Long before this, Vincenti had been taken below. Good Master Warden was not informed of the plight in which he had been found, and consequently accepted the compromise, the more readily as he had not the vaguest idea what else he ought to do. So his fees were paid, and the ship released.

Why were the guilty allowed to go thus unpunished? Not out of pity or affection, you may be sure. There were two reasons for compromise, savoring more of the wisdom of the serpent than the softness of the dove. Cosmo de Ribolini wished for his own sake to hush up a business which, once submitted to investigation, might produce disastrous disclosures; and, for Desmond's sake, he was glad to have a hold over Willford. Besides, in the good old days they were not particular about compounding felonies.

The sailors, to whom the victim was a poor foreigner—never mind what—were very good—aye, even tender, in their way, to Vincenti. They washed him, clothed him, dressed his sores, slapped him on the back (rather too warmly), and told him to "cheer up." They brought him, besides some of their own dinners, a supply of tobacco, rum, apples, and other deli-

cacies as refreshment, a fiddle for his amusement, and the ship's cat for company.

Some of these good fellows had known or heard of Desmond, and thought they were obliging him by these attentions. Had he called upon them to keel-haul Willford and the skipper, it would certainly have been done. But now, to their deep disgust, Willford and the skipper had been allowed to go about their business. There was no one to be keel-hauled, and nothing to do except to talk it all over; which they did, as sailors will—each one telling the others what they all knew, and then in turn listening to the old story, *da capo*.

At last some one struck out a new line, and said it was a past-participled shame, and that he would be the reverse of blessed if he sailed with such a pirate. He had received an advance of ten crowns on his share of the voyage; but that he did not mention. The idea took, and very soon Desmond and Cosmo were left alone with the rescued man on board.

As the "honest mariner" left the ship, he found something. He found it on the main deck, where the struggle had taken place between his crew and Desmond's men at Greenwich. He struck it with his foot by accident, and it jingled; so he stooped down, as though to coil a rope out of the way, picked it up furtively, and put it in his pocket. It was an iron key, the haft fantastically shaped like an anchor entwined with sea-weed.

* * * * *

When Master Warden and his men had left, and Dick with them, to tell Martin Earle the news, Cosmo took Desmond aside, and whispered—

"Where is he? Hast seen him?"

"He is in the cabin. Yes, I have seen him, and he recognized me."

"He was sane then?"

"Sane!"

"Dost not know that he has his lucid intervals?" Desmond did not, and Cosmo's account of what had been told Dick by the landlady of "The Bell," raised a spark of hope in his breast. He might yet ask, 'Where is my child?'

He now remembered the strange change

of expression which had passed over his rescued enemy's face as he held the water to his parched lips. Was it possible that, softened by suffering, and grateful for escape from a horrible death, he might restore little Hugh? It did seem possible to Desmond; for he felt that the fierce craving for vengeance which at first had filled his own heart had cooled, and was fading away. What good, he began to think, would Vincenti's blood do him? Would it bring back the light into Sweetheart's eyes? Would it revive the home she brightened? Would it restore her boy? So he saved his life; and when Cosmo had told him of his visions and his remorse, "Surely," thought Desmond, "there is an end now."

There was no end. In his sane moments Vincenti de la Torre hated Hugh Desmond more bitterly than ever: hated him because he had escaped his revenge—hated him because Sweetheart had died to save him—hated him for having saved his own life—and hated him the more for having spared it afterwards. It was, perhaps, this last cause which irritated him the most. He was to be spared because he was mad! When lifted out of the hold into the light, the first objects which met his bewildered gaze were Desmond's face and the flash of a knife. He half gasped a prayer when the knife fell—not on his heart, but on the cruel cords which bound him. There was wonder—nothing but wonder—in his question, "Why do *you* do this?" He could not understand why one should not shoot his enemy from an ambush, or stab him from behind, or fall upon him when he was bound, and kill him. As his strength came back, he thought that there was something ignominious in his escape. He had been spared because he was mad! The idea struck at the sane portions of his brain, or at those mysterious influences which gave him lucid intervals, and weakened them.

When Desmond and Cosmo entered the cabin, they found him seated by one of the stern ports, gazing moodily at the water.

"You here!" he cried, as he recognized the latter. "Whose prisoner, then, am I—thine or his?"

"For thy protection thou art in my charge, but not as a prisoner," said Cosmo.

"Why am I kept here?"

"Thou shalt be removed anon."

"Whither?"

"That is not yet decided."

"But it lies in thy decision?"

"Doubtless."

"Then do I call upon thee, Count de Ribolini, as kinsman, as knight, as fellow noble, to stand by me. I charge thee, by all that is holy, just, and honorable, to be true to thy name and thine order. I am forced, for a moment, to be false to mine, and treat yon buccaneer as mine equal. All I ask of thee is what thou art bound to grant—a fair field."

Desmond folded his arms, and heard all this with a smile of pity and contempt.

"Answer him," he said to Cosmo, "as we determined."

"I will do all for thee that knight and noble may," Cosmo answered.

"And as kinsman?" Vincenti demanded eagerly.

"Thou shalt have justice—even from a kinsman whom thou hast so deeply wronged."

"By force of an accident—an awful, utterly unforeseen accident! But thou! thou didst deceive thy father—thou didst deceive me. Thou didst take the part of yon gutter-blood against the dictates of thy race, the principles of thine order. Wronged! thou wronged! But listen! Protect me from that—that bloodless, passionless statue there, of murder, and all shall be forgiven."

"He saved thy life."

"Only to take it when it should be sweeter to me."

"Let this end," said Desmond, with a gesture of ineffable scorn. "I give thee thy life."

"Hearest thou that?" asked Cosmo.

"Aye," muttered Vincenti; "but there is something behind. They spared my life when they bound me in that den" (he shuddered as he pointed with averted eyes to the trap-door in the deck). "Oh, yes! they left me my *life*—that was the cruelty! A dagger-stroke would have been a mercy.

How do I know through what torture this man, who says so glibly 'I give thee life,' will make me drag it?"

"I mean thee no harm," said Desmond.

"For to-day?"

"For ever."

"Why?"

"Because God has taken thy punishment out of my hands. I pity and forgive thee."

"Ha! you think I am stricken mad! So I am—I am mad sometimes—but not now—not for many hours every day. Flatter not thy soul that thou canst pity and forgive because I am mad. If thou dost, thou art a coward and a knave. Pity me? Forgive me? Hypocrite! what hast thou done to me in comparison to that I have wrought against thee? And thinkest thou that *I* could pity—I could forgive? Never. Thou liest, saying, 'I mean thee no harm.' Let me gain a little strength. Give me but till to-morrow. Restore me my sword, and grant me a fair fight for my life—or *thine*."

"What dost thou know of 'fair fight?'" retorted Desmond, stung by his taunts—"thou mean assassin! I will not fight with thee," he added after a pause, in which he recovered his calmness.

"Coward!" hissed Vincenti through his clenched teeth.

Desmond had turned to leave the cabin, for he saw clearly that it was hopeless to ask the questions which were burning in his breast. He had done more harm than good in accompanying Cosmo. The idea that suffering and remorse had softened, or could soften, such an one as Vincenti de la Torre, must be abandoned. Some other agency had to be sought, or some other chord struck. Desmond had turned to leave the cabin, but the word "coward" checked him. The speaker's face was livid with rage. Twice he tried to rise, and throw himself upon the object of his defiance; and twice he sank, writhing in impotent fury. "There is more than anger here," mused Desmond, "and I may turn it to use."

"Signor Vincenti de la Torre," he said aloud, advancing so near as to be able to fix him well with his eye, "till now, an'tit

please thee, what manner of man is a coward?"

"Such as thou art."

"Nay; that is not a reply."

"A coward is one who dares not fight at equal vantage."

"Good. Can we fight at equal vantage?"

"The vantage is on thy side, but I waive it. Thou art well and strong; I but lately at death's door."

"It would verily be a coward act to slay a fainting man."

"Wait but ten days, and, good swordsman as thou mayest be, thou shalt not easily hold thine own."

"Let us anticipate these ten days. Let us suppose that thou art recovered. Thou hast thy strength, thy reason, and thy sword. Our duel is to the death."

"To the death," reiterated Vincenti, with flashing eyes.

"There is no need for witnesses."

"None."

"We meet in some place where we cannot be disturbed."

"Agreed."

"We have our swords, and, should they fail, our daggers."

"I will take back the insult I flung in thy teeth," cried Vincenti. "Thou art no coward—go on."

"We stand face to face upon the sod beneath which one of us must find a grave, if, indeed, the other have life enough left to bury him."

"Talk not of burial; I will leave thy carcass there for the dogs and the kites."

"Ah! thou dost fully realize the position?"

"I do—fully."

"Now listen. My foot has slipped, and I am at thy mercy. By some trick of fence thou hast disarmed me, or so got within my guard so that my breast is open to thy sword. One spring, one thrust, and thy hilt would be at my ribs, thy blade through my heart."

"There it should rust!" he hissed.

"Signor Vincenti de la Torre," said Desmond, sinking his voice, "what has happened once may happen again."

"I do not understand thee now."

"Once before I was at thy mercy as much as I have just pictured."

"Once before," muttered Vincenti, growing deadly pale.

"Once before. Thy aim sure, thy match burning, thy finger on the wheel. Bethink thee. Now, in fancy, thou hast thy point at my heart. Answer me. WHAT WOULD COME BETWEEN US?" He threw up his arms with a wild cry. "HER BOSOM, AS IT DID BEFORE!" and fell fainting upon the deck.

CHAPTER XX.

TOGETHER.

"'Twas ill done!" exclaimed Cosmo, angrily, as he knelt beside the prostrate form of his kinsman, and lifted his head from the deck. "Thou hast maddened him."

"There was no reason in his sanity," Desmond replied. "There may be in his madness. Let this work, I pray thee. There are strong waters in this case bottle. Give him some, and when he revives, encourage him to speak of—of her. He will, when alone with thee."

"I do mistrust thy plan greatly; but —"

"Ah, brother, bear with me yet awhile. Who has more to lose by it than I?"

Cosmo was disarmed. "Be it as thou wilt," he said.

"And thou wilt tell me all that passes?"

"Every word."

"Good news or bad?"

"Every word."

"Thy hand on it."

The autumn day was almost gone as Desmond returned to the upper deck. He paced up and down in the twilight shaken to his last nerve with hope and fear. Rover, buccaneer, dabbler in unlawful arts as he was, prayer came strange to him. He knew no formula for invoking God's help. He did not fall on his knees with the heart-weary cry of the publican in the temple, but his whole soul went up in supplication. His little Hugh, his first-born, his only son, whom he had fondly pictured as the pride of the autumn, the prop of the winter, of his life. Had the

Father of Mercies defended the child? Would HE speak by the mouth of his mother's murderer? "Oh, my darling! my darling!" he cried; "if thy pure spirit may do aught in this weary, wicked world, help me—help me to our child! Take all my rebellious thoughts, all the reproaches wrung from me in my misery against thy God. Lay them with these repentant tears at *His* feet, and add thy prayers to mine!"

Down in the cabin Cosmo had little difficulty in restoring his kinsman to consciousness, but it was some time before he spoke. He suffered himself to be raised and helped to a seat. He passively swallowed the liquor which Desmond had left for him, without a word on his own account, or in reply to Cosmo's questions. When he did speak he went straight back to what was passing at the moment when he fell.

"No," he said, as though summing up the result of a long self-examination, "I was wrong. I did not think of that. He is no coward. 'Twould verily be so. I could not kill him—she would not let me kill him. She would die again to save his life."

"None but a good and tender heart could win such love as that," Cosmo observed, mindful of his promise to lead him on.

"Bah! women are like dogs: they lick the hand that strikes them."

"Not the women of our race, cousin. My sister loved her husband because he was brave, and kind, and true. What more could any man be? Bethink thee what sort of spouses the ladies of our land are compelled to endure, and then ask thyself what right had we to blame her?"

"She has brought a taint into our blood," replied Vincenti, sullenly.

"Would to God that the veins of every noble Italian family were invigorated by the blood of such men as Hugh Desmond," said Cosmo; "there would be less lying and craft; more true courage and manhood then."

"He is a wizard—he has bewitched thee!"

"Foolish words! A wizard! Were he

such, what would have become of thee? Thou wouldst never have escaped him as thou didst—with the child."

"Ah! I have him there!" Vincenti muttered with eyes that flashed a wild light. "I cannot have his life, but I can take out of it half its delight, and all of our disgrace. Would that I could have carried them both away; but the girl"—his voice sunk at this point—"the girl was with *her* where they laid her; oh, so white! so white! with the red spot over her heart. We had the boy then, or——"

"Where is he now?"

"Ah, where?" replied Vincenti, relapsing into dreamy gloom.

"But surely," Cosmo eagerly began, "he lives; you cannot have——. Tell me that he lives."

"Yes, I think he lives."

"Think!"

"I am well nigh sure he lives. Marco took him when we separated. It seems years ago, but it cannot well be so long. Marco took him into Scotland, and—I will tell thee why I think he lives. If he were dead, *she* would know it. He would be with her when she comes."

"Hast heard from Marco?"

"Once only; just before he sailed for Italy."

"He has returned then?"

"Yes. He wished me to join him, but I—I met with Master Willford, and he brought me here."

"But the boy—is he with Marco?"

"With Marco!" Vincenti echoed, dreamily.

"Repeat not my question, but answer it. Where is the boy?"

"I know not."

"Is he with Marco?"

"No."

"Then where has he been disposed? What has been done with him?" demanded Cosmo.

"I will not tell thee," replied his kinsman, moodily. "Press me no more; this questioning vexes me. Am I to be kept for ever in this cursed ship? Where is Desmond?"

"On deck."

"It is getting late; remove me as thou promised. Whither are we to go?"

"To the house of one Martin Earle, my friend."

"Here in London?"

"Not a mile from where we are."

"Is this Martin Earle known to Desmond?"

"Well known."

"Does he, too, lodge in his house?"

"That I cannot answer with certainty. Perhaps he may go there now."

"Then will I not. Take me back to the hotel whence I came."

"Thou wouldst not be received there."

"Because I am sometimes mad? Kinsman, have mercy upon me. Take me somewhere where Desmond cannot come."

"He has given his word not to harm thee; he will keep it."

"I do believe him. He will not wittingly harm me; but—listen to me, Cosmo de Ribolini. I am not mad now. I soon shall be. I dread these two together."

"What two?"

"He and—and the one who is dead."

"What converse can the living have with the dead?"

"I know not. I only know how the dead can move the living. If *she*, moved by some influence of his, were to demand her child, what could I do! Merciful heaven! what could I do?"

As he spoke, the perspiration stood in heavy beads upon his pale forehead, and a cold shudder shook him to his centre. As he spoke, the man whose life he had made desolate was looking up to heaven, half-blinded by his tears, and crying—

"Oh, my darling! my darling! help me to our child!"

Cosmo now saw how right Desmond had been in assailing this man through his delusion—or what they both believed to be a delusion—and quickly followed up the advantage he had gained.

"What couldst do?" he repeated. "There can be no doubt on that score. Appease her troubled spirit by restoring the boy to his father."

"I cannot. It is too late," Vincenti groaned.

"Lay thy commands upon Marco to disclose where he has left him, and I will find and restore him."

"It is too late. For the love of God!" gasped Vincenti, "get me out of this ship before the night sets in. Something is closing in around me different to all that I have felt before. Ah! there it is! See! yon speck of light."

He seized Cosmo's arm, and pointed to the darkest corner of the cabin, where there was no light at all.

"It is ever thus. The light comes like a dim star, and spreads till it takes her shape. There! see how it has grown already. Takes her shape vaguely at first; settles into part of an arm or a fold of her dress, and then the fragments crystallize together, and she stands before me with her pale, sad face. Look! No, no—there! Hast eyes, and canst not see? There! 'Twas but a foot a moment ago, and now her form is clear up to the girdle. Watch for the red spot. It is coming. *Now!*—said I not well? Just over the heart; red as red can be. That is where the death-shot passed. There is more blood higher up; but that is nothing, though it makes more show. That little spot, no larger than a rose, let Death in. Watch, and thou wilt see her face formed in that brighter glow above. Holy Mother of God! What change is this?"

Hitherto he had spoken quite calmly, and with that tone of self-complaisance common in those who successfully pre-describe the phases of a changing scene or object. He spake as though it were due to some merit in himself that the vision should present itself exactly as he had said it would be developed and appear. But at last, when what he had called "her pale, sad face" should have come into view, his whole manner altered.

Cosmo (who had been watching him with awe and wonder, and so worked upon by his earnestness that there were instants in which he fancied he could distinguish the dim outline of a female form in the darkness) felt his flesh creep as he noted that change. If ever a spirit from the other world was seen by reflection in the face of a living man, the spirit of Maria Desmond was on the face of Vincenti de la Torre, stamping it with surprise and horror, fear and supplication.

"Thou art going to speak," he cried, half in terror, half in protest. "I see it in your eyes, from which the old sad expression has departed; in the frown upon your brow; in the menace of your outstretched hand. Thou hast never spoken yet. In the name of God, hold thy peace!"

"*In the name of God, speak!*" said a solemn voice.

Cosmo turned, and saw that Desmond stood in the doorway.

Never for a moment had he doubted that Cosmo would keep his promise and tell him faithfully all that should pass. Great as was his impatience to know how his scheme was progressing, agonizing as was his suspense, these would never have driven him to play the listener. He was drawn by some influence so strong as to prevent even the formation of an idea to resist it.

He was present when the slayer of "Sweetheart" first spoke of that speck of light, and when that cry, "Holy Mother of God! what change is this?" was wrung from him. He knew, without an effort of thought, what change it was. The "pale, sad face" would appear no more. One glance at Vincenti was enough to show that, mad or sane, the vision he had now to confront was stern, terrible, irresistible—so irresistible as to need no mortal help.

But when Desmond heard it adjured in the name of God to hold its peace, the words, "*In the name of God, speak!*" rose unbidden to his lips.

"*Together!*" gasped the wretched man. "Then am I lost! But in mercy speak not *thou*. If thy face be so fearful, what would thy voice be? Let him speak, and I will answer."

"Where is our son?" said Desmond.

"I cannot answer," Vincenti replied, not to his questioner, but to the place whence he had never yet withdrawn his haggard, eager gaze. "If spirits know what passes in this world, thou canst bear me out that I speak the truth."

"But not the whole truth." This from Desmond.

"I will tell thee all I know, and he will hear me. Ah! that is kind! Thou hast lowered thy hand; thy face has softened

somewhat. I can breathe more freely now. I will tell thee all. When I went with Marco to thy dwelling that night, I had not, as he " (with a gesture towards Desmond) "supposes, a fixed intention to take his life. No. I had long suspected that my kinsman was not true to the errand upon which he had been sent—at my suggestion—by the head of our house; and I wished to know the truth. Until I was quite sure that its heir was a traitor to his duty, I was not justified in acting independently and in defiance of him. From his own lips I learned that he had tricked me; that his father had robbed me of my revenge; that he himself would stand between me and justice."

"Justice?"

"Was it just that such a man should rob me of my bride? Why could he not have left thee to wed according to the customs of thy race? Five years I labored for a clue to find my enemy; and I found him, listening to a declaration that the vendetta was at an end, with thy arms around him, thy face pressed to his heart. I came not to kill, I tell thee, or to steal thy boy. It was Fate—Fate!"

"Speak of the boy," said Desmond, no longer able to control the yearnings of his heart. "No matter what thou didst intend to do—speak of what thou hast done."

The cabin was by this time quite dark. They could not see each other's faces. They spoke in whispers; but every word came out clear. Outside the swift river rushed on, glittering under the stars, to the sea.

"I carried the boy away," pursued Vincenti—speaking, as before, to his vision—"before me on the saddle, he striking me with his young hands and threatening roundly. 'I will tell my father,' quoth he, 'and he will kill thee.' I said to myself, 'Ah! there is our blood in his veins.' He struggled and fought, and cried for help, so that we were forced to bind and gag him."

"My child! my little one!" moaned Desmond.

"Marco was for silencing him in a shorter way, but I withstood him. I would

not kill the child, though I did not want him to live. It was enough for me that he should never be able to claim kinship with us; and to assure this, it was necessary that he should be lost—lost to himself, lost to all the world. My plan was to take him to a sea-port, and ship him to some far country, which, perchance, he would never reach, or reaching, would be known to none."

"And so perish?" cried the father.

"Yes," Vincenti continued, more as though thinking aloud than answering. "Yes, I did think he would die. He was sick when the ship sailed, and they were a rough set enough on board. I had to pay a large sum before they would take him, and I told them the truth."

"The truth!"

"My truth. That he was a child of whom his family were ashamed, and no questions would be asked how he fared for the future. Yes, I did think he would die; but there were women of the band, and I suppose one of these has succored him."

"May the good God bless her!" prayed Desmond.

"Is it better so, or that he were with thee? Better, mayhap, for me. If the pain of his father for his absence has changed thee so, what wouldst thou be were he grieving for his death?"

"Whence sailed this company!" Desmond demanded.

"From Glasgow."

"For what country?"

"The New World. To colonize a place called—what is another name for Scotland?"

"Caledonia."

"Right. New Caledonia."

"And this is solemn, sacred truth?"

"It is."

"Then thou needst say no more," Desmond moaned. "I know all the rest. God help me! 'Tis a rash and most unlucky venture; badly timed, badly led, badly provided. My son! my son! But thou art not lost yet. I will follow thee, I will seek thee, and I will find thee, though the rest of my life be spent in the search."

At this moment the lurid light of a torch flashed past the stern port-holes, and the voice of Dick Earle was heard hailing the ship, and saying that all was ready.

They called him on board, and found that Vincenti had sunk upon the deck just where he had confronted the *vision*. He was conscious, and apparently quite sane; but so physically feeble, that he could not rise.

"It is all over now," he said. "Take me where you please."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE IRON KEY.

THERE was a slang phrase current in the days of my youth which exactly describes the frame of mind in which Master Willford left the "Ship." He felt like one who "had lost a shilling and found a fourpenny piece." His grand *coup* had failed. There was no getting hold of Hugh Desmond's property and estate, because there stood Hugh Desmond in the flesh, all the affidavits, informations, and decrees to the contrary notwithstanding.

If big parchments, broad seals, and potent signatures could kill a man and leave him intestate and heirless, Desmond had no business to be alive; but alive he was.

This was a great blow to Willford's hopes; but, on the other hand, he had profited by the resurrection. The officially dead had got him out of a serious scrape. That he had not done so out of pure benevolence was quite clear to Willford who as he seldom did anything without a motive that did not appear in the act, judged others by himself. He knew there was little love lost between them. Still Desmond has got him out of that serious scrape.

Good Master Willford lived upon his character, and it would have been better for him to lose half a dozen intestate estates, than to be hailed before a justice for kidnapping and attempt to murder. This escape was the *fourpenny-piece*; and as he was inwardly congratulating himself upon having saved this, something like the ghost of a chuckle passed his lips.

Ineffably sweet and soothing to the troubled mind is the thought that one has got something out of those who trouble.

It is even a solace to reflect that they have not troubled as much as they might have done had they been a little smarter about it. As Willford went down the side he almost chuckled.

"Just in time," he mused; "another hour, and he would have been told what I had been doing."

So upon the whole there was a good deal to be thankful for; and the prize, being lost, did not look nearly so valuable as when there was a possibility to gain it. Even if Desmond had really been dead, that boy of his, of whom Vincenti de la Torre had spoken, might have turned up and found friends to support his claim.

Besides, there was capital to be made out of the disappointment. He had lost his reward by his own uprightness. He might have seized it; but having conscientious doubts as to whether the supposed intestate were really dead, he—the very man who was to profit by his death—had helped his friends to find him! Thanks to his projected visit with Cosmo and Dick to the Southwark lodgings, such a story as this might be got up, to his present glory and future profit.

His quick thoughts had travelled so far, when the boat's keel grated upon the hard, and his friend the honest mariner whispered, "I would speak with thee," as he helped him to jump ashore.

Their subsequent interview, which took place at Willford's old quarters at the "Bell," was most satisfactory to the honest mariner; for not only did his patron waive all claim to the repayment of the passage-money for the "poor gentleman," but agree to reimburse the skipper for losses sustained by the desertion of his crew. It suited Master Willford that this honest mariner should engage new men, and be off as soon as possible.

With those broad pieces in his pocket, and a flask of buxom Mistress Franklin's best wine under his belt, the honest mariner's heart began to open. He, too, had come well out of a bad business. He had got his money, and would have no evil

dreams about that plank and the shot which was to have pulled it and its wretched burden down to the bottom of the sea. He had been with fellow salts who were troubled with evil dreams, and did not like what he saw. The money was his for nothing, and a good skinful of wine to boot. Willford was a good sort of fellow after all. He might have disowned him, thrown the blame on his shoulders, and then what chance of justice could he—a poor sailor—have had against a man so influential as Stephen Willford, the trusted of the king, and the officer of the bishop?

"Yes," he said aloud, "thou art a staunch comrade, and a liberal. See here now; I will give thee a keepsake."

"Nay, spend thy money for thyself," Willford replied, abstractedly.

"Money be —, 'tis naught that I could buy, or thee either for that matter," the other persisted. "'Tis some foreign toy of no value, but right cunningly cut."

And he produced the key he had found on the deck of his ship—the key, the haft of which was shaped like an anchor entwined with seaweed—and flung it on the table.

Willford was thinking of something else. It was no pleasure to him, this hob-nobbing with a half drunken sailor, and his thoughts were far away from such things as *keepsakes* from a fellow who, he earnestly hoped, might be drowned upon the first favorable opportunity. He was musing upon a new plan to get possession of Hugh Desmond's lands, which had begun to present itself dimly, but with some prospect of fruition. The casket containing his title-deeds had been destroyed in the fire, and the deeds, of course, in it. If Desmond were to die, how could his heir make out his claim? Nay, more, how could Desmond himself resist being dispossessed, if attacked as the crafty one now musing knew how to attack him? He had purchased those lands himself out of his father's gold. The vendor was a ruined spendthrift, gone no one knew where. Ah! if Desmond had only perished with the casket, how simple it would all have been. Master Willford heaved a

sigh, thus reflecting upon the uncertainty of human affairs, and then it was that the "keepsake," flung by the honest mariner, jingled on the table.

IT WAS THE IRON KEY!

In an instant he recognized it. In an instant the thought that Desmond had saved the casket flashed across his mind.

"Well," expostulated the donor, "there is no need to clutch it like that! It is thine; I give it thee with my free will. Gramercy! A pretty way to accept a gift!"

"'Tis mine already!" stammered Willford. "I lost it. I—I—did not know I—. Forgive me, my friend, if I did appear discourteous, but the surprise! I did not know I had lost it."

"'Tis as good as a gift, anyhow," grumbled the other.

"Aye, and a valued one. I thank thee heartily for—where didst find it?"

"On the main deck."

"It must have fallen as I jumped from the bulwark."

"Nay; I picked it up for'ard of the main hatch."

"It may have rolled there."

"Flat things don't roll," said the mariner, beginning to wish he had not been so liberal. There was some value, it appeared, in that quaint piece of iron.

"No matter, 'tis doubly mine now," replied Willford, with what he intended to be a laugh, "first by property, and next by gift. But say, didst find any other?"

"Other key?"

"Aye; this is one of three. I may have dropped the other two also."

"I found but that."

"Didst search?" asked Willford, eagerly.

"Not I! Wherefore should I?"

"Good master captain, let us return on board thy ship to-night and look. I would not lose those keys for—for—I cannot tell thee how much trouble it would cause me, were I to lose them."

"Be sure thou hast lost them first," said the mariner, stretching out his legs, and replenishing his glass. "'Tis mighty pleasant here. I have my fill of ship-board, I tell thee. Mayhap they are safe in thy pockets, or in thy valise. I budge not."

The Witch-finder's brow darkened, and he muttered "swine!" under his breath, but he made pretence to feel in his pockets, and finding not what he sought, called the landlady to send in his valise, left in her charge. This he searched with well feigned anxiety, and looking up with a face which was utterly false, gasped, "I have them not!" which was perfectly true.

"'Tis not likely that thou didst drop all three together," said the mariner, sulkily, or I should have seen them."

"Thou didst not search—thou hast said so."

"No one else will. Let them bide."

"Some one might find one by accident, just as thou didst," persisted Willford.

"And much he would get—a bit of iron! Leave me in peace, Master Willford, we will look to-morrow."

"To-morrow may be too late. Listen! The other two keys are not like this; they are more valuable."

"H'm!"

"One is made of silver."

"As heavy as yonder?"

"Nearly. And the third is of gold."

"That's worth seeking."

"It is indeed, to me, but not so much for its metal. I would give three times its weight in coined gold to have it safe in my hand."

"Thou hast boxes with strange locks, my friend."

"Most true. Those boxes are of workmanship as curious as their keys. I should be loth to break them open."

"And it would derange thee much to leave them closed?"

"Very much."

"How much."

There was a glitter in the honest mariner's eye as he spoke, which was not lost on Willford. The man distrusted him. What should he do? Make a large bid or a small one? To gain time for consideration, he called to the drawer for another flask of that good wine; but the honest one would drink no more. Ship-board began to have a charm for him. He would have liked to stay where he was and get drunk; but if he did, Master Willford might go on board without him, and find

what he wanted. The honest one smelt what might provide several royal drunks. So he declined the liquor, and repeated his question, "How much?" Thus pressed, Willford made an offer sufficiently large to excite the skipper's cupidity, and not large enough to raise his suspicion.

"Five ounces of gold for the gold key, or as much silver for the silver one. Ten ounces of gold for both."

"Wouldst part with the iron one for five ounces of its own metal?" asked the honest mariner, in reply. "This is not the way to value such goods. Thou art trying to ride off upon the worth of the metal of which these keys are made; I am thinking of the worth of what they will unlock. My neighbor's box is half mine if I have the key."

"What meanest thou?"

"Roundly this, Master Willford. That iron key is not yours—*was* not, at the least, before I was simple enough to give it thee. I found it in a part of the ship where thou hadst not been, and it did not roll. Take it thyself, throw it on the floor, and if it roll a yard, call me a knave! That key was dropped by the man who stopped me at Greenwich, or one of his followers. What if I were to go to Master Desmond and say, 'Kind sir, hast lost an iron key? If so, I—not thinking it might be thine—didst give it to one, Stephen Willford, as a keepsake.'"

"Thou hast better keep clear of Desmond," replied Willford. "He has thee on the hip."

"Mayhap; but would he throw me if I did him this good turn?"

"Tush! This is folly. When we have found the keys 'twill be time enough to settle their value—to me."

"A bargain has two sides, if you please."

"So has a quarrel. We must not quarrel. It would be a sad thing for one of us, Master Skipper, if we two were to quarrel. What is this Desmond to thee? Why pick him out of the score who were buffetting each other on thy deck? Above all, why doubt me?"—(this more in sorrow than in anger)—"me, the trusted servant of the Prince Bishop, the king's officer? Go to! I thought thee a wise man!"

This brought back the honest one to the state of mind in which we found him before Mistress Frankland's good wine had warmed him into generosity and stimulated him into suspicion. If he could have depended upon getting Desmond as an ally, he would have braved it out with Willford; but he was not sure of Desmond. So he gave in, and they returned together to the ship, to pass the night on board together.

* * * * *

In the meantime, Vincenti de la Torre had been removed to the house of Martin Earle, where they tended him according to their lights. What he required was rest—rest of body and of mind. Good living for the one (the poor wretch was half-starved), and anodynes for the other. But these were the *good old times*.

The sword was wearing out its scabbard, so they set to work sharpening the blade and weakening the sheath. They bled him, they purged him, they starved him, and eventually they killed him—all according to rule.

When I say "they," I mean the doctors—and he had the best of them at his bedside. Go to Spain, or Spanish America, and get ill from fever, or break your leg, and the lineal descendants of those medicos will come and repeat the practice. First the lancet, then the emetic, then the purge, and *da capo* if you don't die.

Vincenti de la Torre never really revived. He had collapsed, rather than fallen, when Dick Earle's light was brought down into the cabin. He never stood upright again, or spoke, except to answer questions as to how he felt or what he needed, and the reply was always the same—"No matter; it will soon be over."

So he lingered, receiving every kindness from his hosts, whilst the doctors slowly but surely drenched and bled the little life he had brought there out of him.

"If he becomes delirious, tell me," said Hugh Desmond.

The time came sure enough, and Desmond sat by his bed-side and heard every word. His raving was of people and places unknown to the listener. He did not once mention "Sweetheart's" name, or refer to

her death, the vision in which she used to appear, or the fate of her boy.

Cosmo supposed that Desmond's object was to gain further information on that last head. And so it was at first; for when a man, gazing into utter darkness, addresses the figure of a dead person, speaks of its foot, its robe, its hands; notes changes in the expression of its countenance, and answers questions put by a living being well-known to him, as though they emanated from that vision—it was open, even in that superstitious age, for one like Desmond to seek some sort of corroboration of the truth of those replies, if it were only of that feeble sort which repetition gives.

But Cosmo, whose leanings were towards the prosaic and material, rejected it all. The man was mad, had been mad, and would be so to the end. Why attend to what he said? The manner and subject of his raving had changed; but still it was raving, and nothing else.

Desmond heard him patiently, never replied a word, but watched by his dying enemy night and day till the end came.

CHAPTER XXII.

WESTWARD HO!

HUGH DESMOND had a quiet, resolute way of doing what he made up his mind to do. He had resolved to seek his lost boy in the New World, and most of his preparations were completed before his friends knew that he even contemplated such a step.

Cosmo had made his plan also. His brother-in-law must be taken out of England—out of his old life, the sad shadows of its lost joys, and the surroundings which kept its sorrows present to his mind. He would take him to Venice, to his old friend Bosco; and little Mary—they called her by her English name now—should go with them, and learn to love Marcelina. As soon as the year of mourning for the old count was over, they (Cosmo and Marcelina) would be married, and then their home (wherever it might be) would be

Desmond's, and his child would be their child—was she not a Ribolini?

They followed the remains of Vincenti de la Torre to the grave, and then the subject was broached.

"This ends one chapter of our lives, brother mine," said Cosmo. "'Tis idle looking back. We must begin a new one, with new thoughts and hopes."

"We will," Desmond replied, pressing his hand; "we will."

"Bravely said. I will take thee to see my promised bride—thou and little Mary—and when we have doffed these sad colors, thou shalt dance at my marriage."

"Mayhap I shall see thee married."

"Nay, 'tis past a mayhap."

"I might return in time," mused Desmond, half to himself.

"Return?"

"Cosmo, I must go and seek my boy."

"Saints of Heaven! Can it be that thou believest what that wretched madman said?" cried Cosmo.

"I dare not disbelieve it."

"Tush! 'Twas very madness. Remember, I was with thee at the time. Couldst see the figure he addressed?"

"No; all was dark to me."

"To me also. So we are sure that he was raving on one subject. There was no figure of a woman there. All he spoke was addressed to the creation of his disordered brain, which, as he imagined, compelled him to confess. Judge what was said by what was seen, and be a reasonable man, Master Desmond."

"Dost believe that the living have power over the dead?" Desmond asked, in a low, grave tone.

"I do not."

"I do. But a few days ago, I would have scoffed at one who would answer the question as I do now."

"And how has this change been wrought, I pray thee?"

"By thee."

"By me!" exclaimed Cosmo. "Art dreaming! Why the subject has never even been broached between us! If it had——"

"I know what thou would'st say," interrupted Desmond; "thou had'st also been

a scoffer. Well, a seed will grow in one soil and perish in another; so there is no wonder that some minds will give root to thoughts which others cannot entertain. Hast considered well all the words and actions of the wretched man whose grave we filled to-day?"

"Thou hast given me no advice," said Cosmo. "Thou hast questioned me of them till I am weary. Wilt begin again?"

"No, I have heard enough. Thou hast kept thy promise to tell me all that passed in my absence, and I thank thee. I will weary thee no more. I am convinced."

"Is it possible," asked Cosmo, laying a hand upon his shoulder, and regarding him with an expression of mixed surprise and anxiety, "that this wild idea was planted by a madman's ravings?"

"He was not always mad."

"I am not so sure of that. His madness was more or less violent; but I doubt me if he were ever completely sane."

"Cosmo, I have pondered over all this deeply. He was sane from the time we entered that cabin till his death," said Desmond.

"But the vision!"

"Was not that which he had seen in his hours of demency?"

"Why he described what would appear before, as he fancied, it came into view."

"All but the face, mark that! Remember also the shriek of surprise and fear he gave when the face came into view. 'Holy Mother of God! *what change is this,*' those were his words. There was a change then. The vision of his madness never spoke, never threatened him—recollect thou his gasp of relief when she lowered her hand? in a word, it never had power over him. This visitation had such power, and it came from me."

"In the name of wonder, how?"

"I cannot tell," Desmond replied, becoming suddenly excited. "It frights me even to think what that power can be, or how it may be used. I had it unknown to me, and used it blindly. The strangest part of all is that he—he, this sometime madman—knew what would happen if the living and the dead joined against him."

Cosmo remembered how earnestly the

dead man had prayed to be taken somewhere, anywhere, out of Desmond's reach, and his wild cry of "Together!" when Desmond appeared at the cabin door. The recollection startled him, and there was no tone of mockery in his next question.

"But how camest thou aware of the possession of this power?"

"It grew upon me. I was grieving for my child, praying he might be restored to me until insensibly to myself the cravings of my heart got beyond prayer—they became commands. Then came the thought that the angel in heaven, who was his mother, might be permitted to help me from hoping it might be so. I passed—I know not how—into entreating, then into willing with all the force of my mind that it should be so—and so it was. No, Cosmo! it was not a madman's vision which came to Vincenti de la Torre that night. He was sane. He saw with other eyes than ours; was compelled to speak by some force we do not understand, and his words are true."

"At least they can be verified," said Cosmo, after a pause.

"How!"

"By inquiry at the port from which the expedition sailed."

"Not so. A child more or less would make no matter. Besides, he was put on board, most like, at the last moment."

"With no one to care for or protect him! Alas! my brother, knowing what thou dost of this misguided company, is there hope enough to fill thy sails for so terrible a voyage?"

"It has no terrors for me," replied Desmond, with a sad smile. "Thou meanest right kindly, kinsman, and I thank thee. I thank thee with all my heart for thy offer touching mine—mine other child. In good sooth, I had it on my tongue to beg thee shelter her till I should return. Take her to Venice, to thy Marcelina. Dame Martha Denys, whose son goes with me, will tend her on the voyage. They will be here to-night."

"Thy plans are laid well," observed Cosmo, somewhat quickly.

"Nothing can change them. If thou

wilt not take the child—'tis not a man's charge, and——"

"God's life! is she not blood of my blood," Cosmo broke out. "Was not the proposition mine?"

"Ay, but it included me. The child alone is a different burden."

"With all thy skill," Cosmo replied, laughing, "I would rather have Dame Martha for a nurse than thee. But if thou *must* go, remember Master Willford, and take heed to leave thy affairs in good order and in safe hands."

"Half-an-hour's talk with good Martin Earle will do all that," Desmond replied with the nearest approach to gaiety he had shown for many a day. He was going to move and to act; to venture and to dare. His mind was freshened up by the prospect, as soon as his body would be by the performance; when the blue sea would be under him, and every bound of the good ship be bringing him nearer and nearer to his boy. Cosmo noted the change, and though scarcely half convinced, said to himself, It is well. He will not find what he seeks, but may return with another blessing—oblivion!

He had his half-hour with Martin Earle, and a longer interview with Dame Martha the next morning. It was not out of any mistrust of the goldsmith that he made no alteration in his compact with her. The casket was to remain in her keeping. The oath of Desmond to Denys was ratified. He had little that was new to say except this—and he repeated it solemnly as they separated. "If I do not return; *beware the hand which holds the iron key.*"

Has the reader forgotten John Eastman—Dick Earle's "dog?" Honest John had been having a bad time of it ever since his fellow 'prentice returned. The house was full of whisperings and mystery. Another foreigner was brought there sick, and died. Dick was more estranged than ever to him. He might go out and stay away for hours, and their master—hitherto so strict in such matters—said not a word; he seemed to like having him out of the way. Who was this Desmond—who this Master Willford? that the one should sit night

and day by the dying stranger's bed-side, and the other come so often to ask how it fared with him. They were all mixed up in something—but what was it? Could it be another Popish Plot? John became angry with Dick, discontented with his master, vexed with himself, and suspicious of everybody. He also became curious, and wounded self-esteem whispered, “find out what is going on, and let them know you're not the fool they treat you like.” With infinite cunning (as he thought) he made the acquaintance of Master Willford, and soon became quite intimate with that gentleman. They supped together almost every night, and gradually the 'prentice elicited with infinite cunning, again (as he thought) that Master Desmond was a dangerous character in league with those foreigners against his (John's) worthy master, and that Dick—poor foolish Dick!—was unconsciously abetting them in their nefarious designs. This was morally certain, but could not *yet*—confidential Master Willford laid great stress upon the “yet,” be proved.

We, who know Master Willford, need not be told that he purposely threw himself in John's way, and pumped him dry.

Yes, there was another conspiracy against the life of his most sacred Majesty, and Desmond was in it. To no other man than John would Master Willford have said so, and perhaps he was wrong to trust any one with the King's secrets; but then John was so prudent, and had so won his, Master Willford's, confidence, that—well, he had told him so much, and there was no harm going on, especially as by doing so he might save that worthy man and excellent citizen, Martin Earle, from imminent peril. There was a conspiracy, and its members knew each other by the possession of certain keys curiously fashioned in gold and silver. Had he (John) ever seen such keys in the possession of Desmond or of the foreigners? John had not, but he had heard Desmond asking about some key which he had lost. Well, let him, John, be on the alert, watch well all that happened, and report. Above all, let him be on the watch for a curious gold key, and one somewhat of the same

sort in silver. These once obtained the conspirators would be baffled. When Desmond's approaching departure was reported, the 'prentice was told to take careful note of everything which that conspirator might leave in the goldsmith's charge; “for,” said Master Willford, “if perquisition be made hereafter, and those keys be found in his house, he would be a lost man.”

Thus was John led to believe that it would be his duty, as a loyal subject and a good 'prentice, to be a spy in his master's house, and—upon occasion—a thief.

Master Willford saw daylight again. Desmond might never return from the New World. The child which was to be taken to Italy might die. Patience! The fruit would ripen and fall, or else events could be so shaped as to render its plucking safe and easy. Now was the time to clear up all doubt about the casket of the three keys. If it had not been destroyed it would be deposited with Martin Earle; that was certain. Desmond would never think of taking it to sea with him, nor was it probable that Dame Martha would be hampered with it on her voyage. It would be left with the goldsmith if it existed. John Eastman was instructed to be particularly watchful for the casket or for any package which, from its size and weight, might be supposed to contain it. But no casket, or any sign of one, appeared; nothing but their ordinary wearing apparel came with Martha Denys and the child. The young smith had not brought anything for his master, or for Martin Earle; and Desmond had made no deposit, save something between a small sack and a large purse apparently full of papers, in the latter's strong box; and this—whatever it was—had been there for years. Still, Desmond was constantly inquiring if his missing key was found, and appeared vexed and anxious about it.

“Why such trouble about a fantastic piece of iron,” mused Willford, “if the casket be destroyed, or no longer contain those deeds?”

One night John Eastman met his en-

tertainer with a deeper shade of gloom than usual upon his face. The ship chartered by Desmond and the *Venus* which had come round from Southampton for Cosmo de Ribolini was to sail on the morrow in company as far as the mouth of the Thames, and there was to be a high junket on board, to wish Desmond good luck and God speed over the great ocean. Martin Earle and Dick, and a host of Dick's friends, male and female, were invited; and there was to be feasting and music until the tide turned, and then the guests were to come back in shallops.

"But I—" said John Eastman in conclusion—"I have to stay at home, and mind the shop. No outing for *me*, I promise thee."

"Methinks good Master Earle might have closed his house for one day," mused sympathizing Willford.

"Or left Dick in charge, why should he have all the pleasure, and I all the work? Who is he? Just a 'prentice like me, no more! though he is master's nephew. My name is as good as his, I know that," growled John Eastman.

John emphasized those last words in a manner which raised Willford's curiosity. A few discreetly pressed questions elicited the fact that Hugh Desmond had made his will, to which it was intended that the goldsmith and Dick Earle should set their names as witnesses: but when the former had signed and Dick was called, it was found that he was not in the house. Then "as they could'n't get their precious Dick," sneered Eastman, "they said that I would do, and I wrote my name. It was as good as his."

"And Desmond took the will away?"

"Nay; he gave it to my master, who locked it away in the strong box."

"Ha! Didst read any as thou wrote thy name?"

"Not a word. What was it to me?"

"Right. I warrant he has left thee nothing, nay, being a witness thou couldst take nothing."

"I tell thee, Master Willford, there is naught but hard work and disappointment for me."

"Not so. Listen! Why should we not

enjoy ourselves to-morrow as well as they? Thou shalt not spend a lonely day, dear lad, I will keep thee company. Thy Master cannot well return till midnight. We can shut up at six o'clock, and pass the night right gaily! Dost agree? Tush! I have some crowns to spare. What! is this Dick to be the only 'prentice who can ruffle it in the Mall or Tower gardens?"

This settled it. Here was a friend, indeed, one who would not only make the evening joyous, but share in the dull routine of the day! Here was one, higher placed and richer than Dick Earle would ever be, who treated him (poor dupe of a John) as an equal—no "dog" now. When Dick came back from taking leave of his fine foreign friends, he would no doubt want his "dog" to trot after his heels again, and sit up and beg for any scrap of kindness or flattery he might be pleased to fling him. No such thing! He should be taught that his fellow 'prentice was no longer his "dog," and that if he presumed so to treat him, he would meet his match. Friend indeed! What sort of a friend had Dick ever been? Had he ever offered to share his work; to stay in a whole day, when he had no need to do so, to keep him company? Never!

Not another word was spoken against Master Willford's generous proposition, and it was agreed that as soon as Martin Earle and his friends had embarked, Master Willford should join John Eastman at the shop, and there keep watch and ward together over the goldsmith's goods and chattels, including, of course, the will and papers of Hugh Desmond committed to his care.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"WHAT HAS HE STOLEN?"

THE junket on board the "*Venus*" was Dick Earle's idea. As a rule, Dick did not require much provocation to indulge in or organize this sort of vanity; but now he had a better provocative than the prospect of fun for himself. He wanted to cheer up Desmond—to start him happily upon a quest which every one considered hopeless, with bright smiles and pleasant

sounds—to lift him, if he could, out of the dark cloud which had fallen upon his life, and appeared to grow denser every day. To no one save Cosmo de Ribolini had Desmond confided his theory respecting the character of the influence under which Sweetheart's murderer had disclosed the fate of her child. There was no need for explanations with Martin Earle. This was by no means the first occasion upon which his erratic friend and client had come one morning to say he was bound for the other side of the world on the next day but one; nor, after what good Master Willford had attempted, was there anything strange in the wanderer making his will. Easy-going Dick, finding his elders satisfied, asked no questions, and having gained the goldsmith's approbation of the junket, set himself to work upon its details *con amore*. As it was to be a surprise to Desmond, it came off on board the "Venus," which, as we know, had come round from Southampton to take Cosmo back to Venice.

"I'm right loth to leave thee behind, lad," said Martin Earle to his junior 'prentice, when he had given him his instructions for the day, "right loth, but *all* cannot play at once. Some one must watch."

"Aye, master," replied Eastman, "and that *some* one is always *this* one," touching his own breast.

There was nothing sulky, or even reproachful in his tone. He merely seemed to say, "I'm poor Pilgarlic! I've got to take all the kicks, whilst others get the halfpence, and I'm accustomed to it." This touched the goldsmith, because it was in a great measure true. John Eastman had not been quite fairly treated of late. He was in the way, and we all know what happens to people whose room is for some reason preferred to their company. Many a distant errand had been invented; many a piece of drudgery improvised, to get rid of John, or keep him employed out of hearing. The goldsmith was touched more by the absence of a reproach, than by any that ill-used John could have made.

"Thou art a good lad, and an honest," said Earle, laying his hand kindly upon

the 'prentice's shoulder, "and I will make it up to thee, never fear. If I have seemed churlish to thee, John of late, it was not for any fault of thine, or because of any ill-will. I love thee, lad. No, no; many things have gone cross, and—and—well, it matters not now. I will make it up to thee, lad. There! my hand upon it!"

He took John Eastman's hand with his own left, and slapped his own right into it, heartily. Masters did not usually make such pledges with their 'prentices. The "touch"—a dozen passers by saw it—was an honor, though it was intended only as a kindness. It brought the tears into John Eastman's eyes—and it cost him his life.

Unpunctuality was not a fashionable vice in the good old times. The last petticoat fluttered up the side of the "Venus" within a few minutes of the appointed hour of sailing, and the two ships started with the last half of the ebb tide under them, a bright sun above, and a wind which would be more or less fair through most of the reaches of the twisting Thames. There was no hurry. On they went lazily, with just enough sail set to give them steerage way, until the tide slackened, and stood still, and turned. Then the merry-makers—with whose proceedings this history does not occupy itself—took to their shallop, and the ships, with every stitch of canvas set, bore up into the freshening breeze, and heeled over to it, starting sheets of hissing foam from their bows, and plunging on as though they would say, "*Now then! work at last!*"

Hugh Desmond remained on board the "Venus," so as to be with little Mary and Cosmo until the last. If good wishes could send fair winds and a happy ending for his voyage, he had nothing left to pray for. Many a cup had been drained to his health and good fortune; many a mother had blessed him in her heart. Was he not seeking a motherless child? The children—shy of him at first, for his black dress and grief-worn face—soon clustered round him and climbed on his knee, to be told of little Hugh, and exact promises that he would bring the boy to play with them when he came back, and to tell the

wonderful things he had seen. Hope is as catching as fear. *When* you come back, was the date fixed for all sorts of pleasures. No one said "if."

Little Mary also became a personage. She too was going to strange lands where her mother was a little child. Did that strange thing like a heart she wore round her neck belong once to her mother? the other children asked. No, but it would have belonged to her if she had not died. Was it a blessed charm? she did not know. Her father had tied it round her neck just before they started, and told her never to part with it, but to wear it always, night and day. "And he kissed it—cried over it," said the little maid; "so I suppose it is blessed."

When the shallop had passed out of sight, she sat herself on her father's knee, and asked him to tell her about her golden heart, and why she was to wear it night and day.

"Thou art too young to understand," he said, kissing her. "'Tis a fancy. See, this is for thy brother," and he showed her the silver key. "Thine means *Charity*—his *Faith*. I had yet a third, which meant *Hope*, but—" the words "*I have lost it*," were on his tongue, and he checked himself with a shudder.

Days passed—long, uneventful days—and at last the time arrived when the courses of the two ships no longer lay together. With a heavy heart Desmond took leave of his child and Cosmo. Good Dame Martha was so affected by the parting with her son that she lay half fainting on the deck; but as Desmond passed and whispered one word in her ear, she revived, as though the life had been re-smitten into her by an electric shock. "Ay," she muttered, as the boat left the side amidst the cheering of the crew, and poor little Mary's cries to her father to come back. "Ay, Desmond and Denys there! where the sun is setting. Denys and Desmond here! where it will rise again. Hush, hush, my child! I will remember, master; I will *remember*."

It was almost night when the "Shallop" landed its tired passengers at London Bridge. Martin Earle and a few of the

old folks, who had come to consider the best part of a day's junketing to be the getting home again when it was all over, made straight for their beds. Dick, and some of those younger spirits who had not learned what "enough" means, made service on escort duty an excuse for prolonging the fun of the day—an excuse which their fair partners did not wholly reject. So that the streets were quite dark and deserted by the time when—the last leave taking over—he wended his way towards Lombard Street with the satisfaction of having been the promoter, manager, and all but hero of an "out," the pleasure of which had not been overshadowed by a single cloud. He turned into Lombard Street, and saw a sight which sent his joyous blood curdling cold in his veins. His first idea was that Martin Earle's house was on fire; there was such a blaze of light, such a crowd around, such rushing to and fro! There was no fire. The glare was made by the watch with their flambeaux, and neighbors searching the yard with torches; but something extraordinary had happened, that was certain. Dick charged into the mass, sending several highly respectable persons right and left into the gutter, and made for his uncle's room, followed by shouts of "There he goes! hold him! Nay, 'tis the other"—which he did not heed; or heeding, could not understand at this juncture. Prone on the floor, within reach of his strong box, where he had stood a hale, strong man only an hour before; his face woefully distorted, and the life wrung out of half his body by the awful grasp of paralysis—lay Martin Earle, the goldsmith!

It was some time before his shocked and bewildered nephew could persuade the bystanders to speak one at a time, telling what had happened; and even then some had one story and some another; but all agreed thus far. On returning alone to his house he had found it shut up, and knocked in vain for entrance. Becoming alarmed he called some neighbors with whose help he forced the outer door. This done, he had gone straight to his counting room, and the next thing heard

was a shriek, and then a heavy fall. They rushed to the spot, and found him to all appearance dead; his strong box broken open, and a portion of its contents scattered on the floor.

The "other" 'prentice had robbed his master and escaped with the spoil! From this point accounts varied. Some went that he was in a fit, others that he had been struck down by the robber; and there were those who were sure they had seen a man jump from the window as they ran in. A large smear of blood upon the floor under the fallen merchant's head, appeared to bear out this supposition, until the doctor arrived, and finding no wound upon him, dismissed it.

But how came that blood upon the floor?

They made a bed for him where he lay,

for the doctor forbade his being moved, and towards the grey of the morning he opened his eyes and tried to speak; pointing his one living hand towards the strong box. Dick tried to quiet him, but he became more and more excited; when at the doctor's desire his tablets were found, and held so that he might write what his poor lips could not articulate. He wrote this:—

"Dick, what has he stolen? The truth, all; or suspense will kill me."

Ah me! for such an end to a good man's life. The truth was that he was ruined! All his savings—all the bonds, deeds, and securities for others' savings confided to his care, were gone! And amongst them the leathern satchel, containing the will and papers of Hugh Desmond!

BOOK II.

THE FRUITS OF IT.

THE Fruits of it ripen in our own days; and better days, I think, they would be found by many of those on whom perhaps the reader has taken some interest. For example, poor old Martha Denys, instead of being dragged to the river, and "tried" for witchcraft, might, in these more enlightened times, have made quite a nice little income out of her reputation as an entertainer of spirits from other worlds. She might have ridden, not on a *broom*, but in a well-appointed equipage, with a name commonly so pronounced, and a good many of us would have paid our guinea to assist at the *séances* she might have given. And all this without being one whit more of a witch than Master Willford found her!

Vincenti de la Torre, with Scotland Yard after him (instead of Hugh Desmond), might have gotten off altogether. Scotland Yard would probably have formed a *theory* as to the murder of Sweetheart, and have given the right man plenty of time to get out of the reach of Extradition Treaties, whilst its agents were fitting it to the wrong one.

More than two centuries and a half have passed since the SEEDS OF IT were sown, as related in the First Book of this history, and you have not got to wait for the quickening of the germs, for the appearance of the first green spearlet with which the life below is fighting its way into the upper air. You have nothing to fear from flood, or draught, or insect. Quicker than rose Jack's famous Beanstalk my FAMILY TREE has grown, and its fruits are in your hand!

But the one story is ended, and this, you may say, is a new one. Good, my friends. When does any story end, and where will you find a new one?

I had once a little child, who always asked, "And what then?" at the end of the tales I told her. I had married my good princes and princesses, I had killed

my bad kings, enchanters, and such like, as dead as I possibly could; everybody who deserved happiness was made happy, and *vice versa*. But the end was not yet. There came the inevitable, "*And what then?*"

Depend upon it, the dear little maid was right, and there is always something to be told till the end of time, though the storyteller who began the tale may not live to tell it.

In the pages which follow, you have the "what then," when Hugh Desmond started for the New World in quest of his boy, leaving the casket with the three keys in charge of the poor folks he trusted.

CHAPTER I.

"SPLENDID OF MR. TREMAYNE."

THE parish church of King's Morton was decorated last Christmas as it had never been decorated before.

"The old order changeth, giving place to new."

The old order was for the clerk to pick the dust out of sundry holes which his predecessors had bored in the woodwork of the pew doors, and to stick therein little low-spirited twigs of holly—one for each pew; for him to tie handfuls of stiff green stuff round the candle-sticks on reading-desk and pulpit, and to fill the baptismal fount with the fragments that remained.

King's Morton was an old-fashioned town, and the King's Mortonians old-fashioned people, for the most part. The old order did very well for them, and it lasted till pretty Bessie Raynor, the doctor's (M. D.) second daughter, who had been almost adopted by an aunt of High Church views in London—came back to spend Christmas with her family. Then what a change was there! Burnham Wood marching to Dunsenane did not

involve the cutting of more evergreens than this decoration under the new order required.

The chancel became a bower, with a huge white cross slanting from the east window, and the legend, "GLORY TO GOD, ON EARTH PEACE, GOOD WILL TO MEN," in fantastic letters a foot high, made of red berries, around it. You could hardly get in or out of your pew for the festoons which lined the aisles.

Half the young gentlemen, and all the young ladies of the congregation bitten by Bessie (previously bitten herself by several London and Brighton curates of advanced views), went mad upon the work, drove every gardener in the parish into despair by the most barefaced robbery of shrubs and flowers, tore their dresses and spoiled their hands, caused the rector (whose bishop was decidedly "low") anything but a merry Christmas, and left such a mess behind them, that it took a small army of char-women to clean up the sacred edifice in time for church.

Bessie Raynor did not tear her dress, or suffer a scratch upon her little rosy fingers. She drew the designs, gave the orders, cooked up the enthusiasm, encouraged the predatory, snubbed remonstrants, coaxed the rector, praised every one, and put the finishing-touches to the work. All obeyed her.

When, early on Christmas Eve, she subsided, in assumed despair, on the top of a step-ladder, and cried, "More white, *much* more white, or I'm a lost girl. If any one loves me, let them get me—oh! heaps of white!"—a gentleman who had just dropped in to see what was going on, as he was too busy to help, forgot his business, and rode away twelve miles for camellias.

Now it is not easy to get "Oh! heaps of white" (flowers) on the twenty-fourth of December, especially in a country already ravaged by Miss Bessie Raynor's Uhlans.

But they were got, and "Oh, Mr. Tremayne, how SPLEN-DID of you!" was her greeting, as she buried her flushed face in the basket. Then she looked up—still stooping over her treasure—and adled, "I shall take this beauty for my very own; may I?"

She had grey eyes, with opal rings round the iris, and a very soft light in them just then. He watched her as she fastened the bud under her brooch, and tried hard to say "Yes," but his voice failed him.

Dr. Raynor had also dropped in on his return from his "rounds," to escort his wife home. She—good lady—had sacrificed herself to the decrees of propriety, and was doing chaperone to the fair brigade of Bessie's army. The old folks saw the last touches given, and the workers under way to their respective homes. They followed their own contingent, walking slowly, with the air of people who have something to say to each other which neither wants to begin. At last the Doctor came suddenly to a halt, stuck his stick decisively in the snow, and said:

"It won't do at all."

Now this might have been a perfectly logical conclusion to something which had been passing in his own thoughts, but it was not a very intelligible commencement of a conversation with his wife, so that lady replied, "Oh, indeed!" which did not help him on.

"Have you noticed how attentive young Tremayne is to our Bessie?" he asked, still at the halt, and fidgeting with his stick.

"Yes, dear, I have."

"Well, that's what won't do. If it had been Mary——"

"I think there is no need to drag Mary into it," interrupted mamma. "Of course she has not had her sister's advantages, but I don't like to hear her slighted."

"Bless her heart! who slights her? Not I. I think the best praise one can give a girl in these days is that she would make a good poor man's wife."

"Percy is an estimable young man," said Mrs. Raynor, as they resumed their walk, slower than ever, "and if he had his rights——"

"Rights! He has none; never had. One thing that I like him for is that he doesn't cry over spilt milk."

"Well, my dear, we will not argue the point."

"It isn't arguable. If I promise little Peggy Smith a half-crown, and change my

mind, or die without giving it, *I'm* guilty of a breach of faith; but she has no *rights*. She never earned the money, or any rights over it."

"But there are rights which poor Percy has earned."

"That's another thing, quite another thing. I thought you were thinking of the estate," said the Doctor, cooling down.

Now his better half had really been thinking of the estate, and would continue to do so to the end of time. She was a woman, and had a woman's abstract ideas of right and wrong, upon which logic and law were expended in vain.

"Poor Percy" had been promised a great fortune, and did not get it. The person who did get it had not been promised it—on the contrary, every step, but one, was taken to keep him out of it. "Poor Percy" was "estimable," and the other wasn't. That was the rock upon which his right rested. For the present Mrs. Raynor was content to leave them there, and talk of those lesser interests which the Doctor had said were "quite another thing."

"If Sir Stephen did what he ought to do, he would have a good income," she observed.

"But a precarious one."

"He would be all but master of Wharnstead."

"Till the real master came."

"My dear, you know he cannot come as long as Mr. Dennis lives, and he may be spared for twenty years."

"Or die to-morrow."

"Good gracious! You don't mean to say that——"

"I mean to say that he is a man, and mortal, that's all," interrupted the Doctor. "How you snap one up! Do you think that our Bessie would be happy as the wife of Sir Stephen Willford's land agent?"

"That is, supposing he come back."

"One has to suppose the worst."

"How much ought a land agent—for such an estate as Wharnstead—get a year?"

"About a thousand, one way and another."

"Oh, George," said his wife, laying a

hand on his arm, "and we began with three hundred!"

"Yes, old woman," replied the Doctor, gaily; "but that was two and twenty years ago, and you had not been spoiled by an aunt in London."

"I'm half sorry we let Bessie go," mused her mother.

"I am *quite*," growled the other parent.

At this juncture they had to cross a lane, just at a sharp turn therein, and as the Doctor helped his companion down the bank, they were nearly run over by a horseman, and he half unseated by the starting of his steed at the sudden apparition.

"Oh, Mrs. Raynor, I'm so sorry. Doctor, I hope I did not scare you," he stammered. "Be quiet, you brute!"—(this to his horse)—"I did not see you because of the turn."

"Scare me!" cried the Doctor. "No; but you knocked me into the ditch."

"Are you hurt?" asked Tremayne, dismounting. ("Talk of the dev—" was the Doctor's first utterance, but he did not finish the sentence). "I'm sure you must be. Do take my horse."

"No thank ye," said the Doctor, rubbing his shin, and looking askance upon an animal, two of whose hoofs (and not the same two) had been in the air for the last three minutes. "I'll walk! I might run over somebody. When I ride, Percy, I go easy around turns, especially where a foot-path crosses."

"I was in a hurry, sir; I wanted to catch you," pleaded Percy.

"I'm sure he didn't mean—" began Mrs. Raynor, but the Doctor cut in.

"Well, you've caught us, sure enough. What now?"

"I think, dear, we had better be getting home," said his wife. (Her instinct taught her that something was coming, and she wanted her lord's shin to cease smarting before it came. Such small things make men cross, you know). "Mr. Tremayne can call to-morrow and—and—wish us a merry Christmas."

But the doctor persisted.

"Out with it, man alive, now we're here!"

"I wanted you to give me half an hour, sir, to speak to you about something."

"Hum! Half-past four, and we dine at six. Ten minutes to get home, twenty to dress. Yes, there's time; come on now."

"Thanks. You're sure you will not take my horse?"

"Not if I know it," replied the doctor.

Mrs. Raynor had barely thrown off her snow-draggled garments, when in came Bessie—fair Bessie—arrayed from her neck downwards in glittering black, lit up here and there by bunches of the new blue, "just out," coral roses in each delicate ear, a dead-gold dog collar round her throat, and bracelets to match on her wrists.

Not exactly the toilette, you will say, for a country doctor's daughter at the family dinner.

"But what," said she, "is the use of having nice things if you cannot wear them?"

The "nice things" came from that aunt in London who had all but adopted her, and by whom she was only lent to her family for Christmas. When I say "all but adopted," I mean that it was perfectly well understood, on both sides, that she was to live with her father's rich sister, and be her heiress, but no regular form of adoption had been gone through.

There was a good many Raynor mouths—old and young—to be fed every day, a good many educations to be provided for, and the fee-paying population of King's Morton had not increased in proportion to their doctor's obligations.

His sister, widowed at thirty-five, had had enough of matrimony, but not of the gay world in which, for the first time, she found herself rich and free. She had not married for love, and love had not come (as some wise ones assured her it would) afterwards. No children had brightened a life of splendid servitude, of which she did not receive at last the full reward. Mr. Rose left half his money away from her.

A handsome widow, with only thirty-five years on her head, and three thousand a year at her bankers, is in many ways to be envied; but society calls her "detri-

mental" as soon as it is ascertained that she is not again in the matrimonial market, on account of a jealous proviso in the defunct Rose's will.

She attracts young men, and gets in the way of young women, and careful mammas can find excuses not to invite her—such as "Oh! she does not dance," when a ball is pending, or "She's no use—she never plays," when invitations to other gatherings are discussed.

But if she be a chaperone; if she have a pretty girl under her wing who *does* dance, and *will* play, and has expectations—don't you see! Why, then she is a power in the land, and can be as gay as she pleases, under cover of affording gaiety to another.

This Mrs. Rose found out during a visit paid by her nieces, Mary and Bessie; and as she did not want both, selected the one she considered best for her purpose—the youngest, the handsomest, the most *showy* of the two—and, it is only fair to say, soon grew fond of her, and spoilt her to the top of her bent.

And Bessie took to spoiling kindly. She was one of those girls who always look well, and seem in public to be in a good humor. She graced her surroundings, whatever they were. Dress her in a six-penny print, and the thought how simplicity becomes her would arise. Let her sweep past "in sheen of satin and glimmer of pearl," and you would exclaim, "How well she carries it off!"

Things—I am a male creature, and dare not condescend (as the Scotch lawyers say) to particulars in ladies' dress—things, I repeat, lost their individuality, and combined to grace her. Where they were wanted to hang, they hung; and where they ought to cling, they clung. Her hair would fall into the most fashionable disorder all by itself, and the flowers on her skirt never got tumbled.

She did not spare her "nice things." She liked to pelt King's Morton with new bonnets, and to sting the hearts of its female population with envy—not unmixed with hatred and malice—by changing exhibitions of clinging robes of designs and colors which had not, as yet, penetrated into those parts.

This is the young lady who entered her mother's room, as just now narrated, and said—

"Papa's got Mr. Tremayne in the study, ma; and I'll bet you anything you like it's all about me!"

CHAPTER II.

IN THE STUDY WITH PAPA.

"Now then," said Doctor Raynor, as soon as he had pulled off his wet boots and socks, and warmed his feet at the fire. "You see that I stand on no ceremonies with you, Percy. Never mind preliminaries, and fire away."

"I have written to my cousin, sir," said his obedient visitor, "and here is a copy of my letter. If you will be kind enough to read it—I have made it as short and as much to the point as I could—you will see how I stand, and what I want."

Doctor Raynor took the paper, and read as follows:—

Wharnstead, Nov. 25th, 1874.

"MY DEAR SIR STEPHEN,

"It is now three years since your father died, and, at your request, I went on as before managing this estate. I asked you at the time to appoint some more experienced person as your agent, but this you declined to do; and as you have found no fault with my proceedings, and the accounts furnished appear to be satisfactory, I must conclude that what I have done meets with your approval. Upon several occasions I have hinted that my position was not as clearly defined as I could wish, without receiving from you a satisfactory reply. The time has come when I must do something more than hint.

"I want you to send me a formal appointment as your land agent, and attach an income to the position, in order that I may judge whether I am justified in asking one who has become very dear to me, and to whom I flatter myself I may become dear, to share it with me. In four words—I want to marry. If you do not know what land agents for an estate such as yours usually receive, I suppose you can easily find out. Let this be a purely busi-

ness transaction. Forget that we are relations, and leave all that passed previous to my uncle's death entirely out of the question. If your proposals do not suit me, I shall feel no hesitation in telling you so. If my services do not suit you, be equally frank. There are plenty of competent men for you to choose from, and I dare say I shall be able to find other employment.

"Please let me hear from you before Christmas.

"Yours sincerely,

"PERCY TREMAYNE."

"A straightforward, manly letter," said the doctor. "Well, has he answered it?"

"He has," replied Percy, handing a sheet of pink paper, bearing an elaborate monogram at the top, and exhaling a strong odor of musk. "Read it, and tell me what it means."

What it expressed was this:—

New York, Dec. 14th, 1874.

"DEAR PERCY,

"I have yours of the 25th ult. What on earth do you want more than you have got? What is better than a *carte blanche*? Is not Wharnstead big enough for you and the lady, to whom I have not the slightest doubt you will become very dear? Setting aside the amiable arrangement made for me by my excellent father and Mr. Dennis (who, by-the-bye, I hear is good enough to patronize you), I shall probably never trouble the old place with my presence, unless I become very dear to somebody, which is not likely, as I am already very dear to myself, and inclined to let well alone.

"Really, my dear fellow, if I were only to judge you by your letter, I should take the first steamer for Liverpool, rush up by the express, advertise for an agent, and thank God that I had got rid of a — goose. You are treated by me as a cousin, and you want to be a paid servant! You have the position of a country gentleman, and you pine for an appointment as bailiff! This is the consequence of becoming 'dear!' You are in love, my poor Percy, and so stand excused.

"I haven't the least idea what people

pay land agents, and there is no one here to enlighten me. It would tire me dreadfully to find out. *You* know. Why bother me with this more than the price of hay and corn. Take what you want, and put it down in the bill, which I never see, and if I did would probably not understand.

"With best regards to the 'dear' one, and regrets that I am unable to offer my services as best man,

"Believe me,

"My dear cousin,

"Yours very sincerely,

"STEPHEN WILLFORD.

"P.S.—How about that £3714 8s. 2d. spent on some sort of improvements the year before last? Rather a big sum to sink all at once, wasn't it? I hope it's soon going to show some return. I muddle away a good deal of money one way and another, and shall want to draw more than usual next year.

"S. W."

"New York!" said Doctor Raynor, turning back to the date. "I thought he lived in Paris?"

"So he does generally."

"What's he doing in America?"

"I really cannot say."

"Hum! Well, what do you think of his answer?"

"I don't like the postscript, sir."

"Nor I. How much have you been in the habit of drawing?"

"Very little, I have been living at his expense, of course—drinking his wine, eating his mutton and his game, and that sort of thing. And when I went up to London on his business last summer, I charged my hotel bill; but in actual money, I don't suppose I have drawn two hundred pounds."

"Not in three years?"

"No."

"More fool you," the Doctor muttered to himself. "I'm afraid you've spoiled your market," he added aloud.

"I had no need for money. Sir William was very liberal," Percy replied. "Besides, I always expected that my cousin would

make some com—some arrangement, and wasn't in any hurry about it until——" Here he came to a halt, and got very red.

"Have you discussed this with your mother?" the Doctor asked.

He had not been listening to the last explanation, and was looking into the fire with his elbows on his knees, and his hands under his chin.

"My mother has peculiar views on the subject, which—I say it in all respect—disqualify her to give me good advice. She thinks I ought to have the whole estate. I am afraid she would not like the idea of my asking for a salary out of it. She comes of a proud race, you know, and (with a smile) has the most unpractical and unbusiness-like ideas, but the warmest heart in the world."

"I was telling Mrs. Raynor to-day that I liked you because you don't cry over spilt milk," said the Doctor without looking up.

"Thanks; but you see it wasn't *my* milk, that was spilt; so why should I cry?"

"That's the sensible view to take of it. Stick to that, and don't let anybody talk nonsense to you about family pride. Your people on your mother's side have had enough of pride."

"Poor mother! mighty little else came to her."

"If your grandfather had had the sense to put some of it in his pocket, they might have gone back to their own country and lived comfortably upon their property; instead of——Bah! I've no patience with people who run their heads against a brick wall, and quarrel with their bread and butter for *pride*!" the Doctor got excited, and poked the fire.

"What was that about spilt milk?" asked the younger man maliciously.

"Never you mind. Let's get back to that business which brought you here."

The Doctor rose, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and stood with his back to the grate—an attitude he was wont to assume at all seasons when about to lay down the law. He thought for awhile. Then he took up Sir Stephen Willford's letter and re-read it.

"We were speaking of the postscript," suggested Percy, breaking the silence.

"Don't interrupt!" said Doctor Raynor. "Now look here, I'm not one of those who like to make mischief, I hope. Who was it who said that a postscript was often like a scorpion's tail—the place where the sting is? You've found this out for yourself, or I wouldn't—now there's another thing. Do you come to me, merely as a friend, to ask what I think of this letter?"

"No, sir, I came to ask you as Bessie's father."

"Good! So Bessie is the lady to whom—no, I won't repeat the phrase which seems so to tickle Sir Stephen. You want to marry Bessie?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

The words look cold and commonplace on paper. The doctor saw nothing commonplace or cold in the face of the speaker, and thought that they rung like true metal.

"Good again! I like you to be frank, and we've only half-an-hour, you know. To begin with, Bessie don't quite belong to us. Her aunt has taken possession of her. She has expectations from her aunt."

"I never thought of that."

"You've got to think of it. You've got to ask yourself if the position you asked of your cousin is one into which a girl spoiled by two seasons in London, and God knows what sort of nonsense put into her head, could settle down into, and be happy."

"There is not the difference between town and country now that there used to be," said Percy.

"That's true."

"And I suppose I could take my wife to London sometimes."

"To the cattle show?" growled the Doctor.

"Yes, and to Her Majesty's drawing-rooms upon occasion," replied Percy quietly. "She would not be the first Mrs. Tremayne who has been there."

"Give me your hand, my boy. I like that. It was a dirty sneer of mine about the cattle show. I'm sorry. Well, what does Bessie say?"

"I have not spoken to her, yet. I thought it right to come to you first."

"That was the old-fashioned way. I congratulate you upon sticking to it. What do you think she'll say when you do?"

"I think she likes me. I hope that in time—that perhaps——"

"Yes, yes; I understand," interrupted the Doctor, "but we've shunted business. Let's get back to Willford's letter. The letter is fair enough taken alone; but that infernal postscript shows the cloven hoof. Boiled and peeled, and simmered down in its own sauce, it comes to this: 'I will not give you a definite position, or a fixed income, because I want to keep you dependent. Marry; take your wife to a house which isn't your own, and live upon what I please to allow you—and you will be more under my thumb than ever. I pretend not to read or understand accounts; but can tell to two-pence what was spent upon improvements two years ago. I tell you to take what you want; but give you clearly to understand that you must send me more money than usual (and consequently take less yourself) for the future.' That is what it means! He knows what those improvements were."

"They were for almost rebuilding the house."

"Of course. He knows they will not return a shilling, unless it's let, and he offers it to you! Percy, he looks to coming back, or he never would have sanctioned that outlay."

"The whole place would have tumbled down if he hadn't."

"What would that have mattered to him, if he never meant to live there?"

"That is true," mused Percy.

"Read between the lines, Willford's letter means what I have said. I know him. Now I'll tell you what to do—I'm not speaking as Bessie's father, we must leave her out of this till things are a good bit more clear—but as a friend. Write again, and take the bull by the horns. Say in so many words, 'send me by return mail an appointment as your land agent at one thousand pounds a year for five years certain; or I quit the place this day three months,' that's notice enough."

"And if he take me at my word—I

mean, if he refuse?" Percy asked with dry lips and a beating heart. Leave Wharnstead! give up all hope of Bessie! be thrown upon the world with nothing but his brains to help him! The contingency was not a pleasant one to contemplate.

"I don't think he will refuse," said the doctor drily.

"He might. Remember that he has no reason to like me. No one likes the man who was intended to supplant him; of course, I serve his interests more fully perhaps more honestly, than an utter stranger would; but he might not think so."

"My dear Percy, if it suit him to throw you over, he'll do so at any moment. Be sure of that. There's not a drop of generosity in the Willford blood. Do you think old Sir William took you up because he loved you, or wanted to benefit you? Not a bit of it. He did so to spite his son, and please himself—not you. His son will use you as long as you are necessary, and when you are not, he'll throw you away like the stump of a cigar. Therefore I say don't trust him. Tie him up over his signature to a contract, and if he won't be tied, break with him. You'll never be younger than you are, and it will be easier to begin again now than hereafter."

Begin again! Here was a man who had already made two beginnings, and could not be blamed because they led to nothing. Left fatherless as a child, and ignored by all his relatives, the indomitable spirit and perseverance of his mother gave him education, whilst she often hungered for bread. He won an Exhibition from a famous public school, won a Scholarship at Oxford, and was surely winning his way to a first class and a fellowship, when he was sent for to reign at Wharnstead. For three years he lived there as its future owner, and when we first meet him, he has been there just as long as its unrecognised land agent. He left the university at twenty, as you know his age. Rather hard to have to "begin again" for the third time at twenty-six! Harder still to hear such an eventuality mentioned by a man whose daughter he wants to marry!

But the doctor gave good advice. Percy's

position was not such a very bad one, so long as he was content to remain a bachelor. As a man in love he had to know the worst, and then work for a better fortune.

"I'd ask you to stay dinner," said Doctor Raynor, "but perhaps under all the circumstances—you understand?"

"Perfectly. I go to my mother tomorrow, and may stay a fortnight. It will be three weeks before I can get an answer."

"From Willford?"

"From Willford."

"Let me see it when it comes," said the doctor; "and in the meantime, I hope I may trust you not to ask *another* question?"

"You may, sir."

"That's a good fellow! Let things go on just as usual; only don't imagine that it all depends upon your cousin. You've Bessie to reason with, and Bessie's aunt. I won't answer for either. They may have picked up some duke as a son-in-law for me, for anything I know."

Percy Tremayne rode back over the snow to Wharnstead rather troubled by that last shot of the doctor's. Bessie to reason with, and Bessie's aunt! Bessie was not the sort of girl to whom one could offer love in a cottage, and as to Bessie's aunt—the less one spoke of love to her the better. She did not believe in love. Her favorite materials for bearable wedding bonds were title deeds, diamonds, and the three per cents. He shut his teeth and drew a long breath as the house came into sight standing up, huge and solid, against the winter sky. Ah! if he could have gone a wooing as squire of Wharnstead, how differently might that half hour with papa in the study have ended!

He went in, and eat his solitary dinner in one of the two solitary rooms which had life in them, of all that great pile. A square, high-pitched, well-like place it was, with faded tapestry on the walls, and a covey of ugly Cupids sprawling over the ceiling. Here it was that six years ago he had been received by old Sir William, and told to consider himself his heir; and here it is that he keeps his books of account

and writes his letters as young Sir Stephen's agent! A falling off indeed! But it was only since he had begun to think of Bessie as a wife, that he realised the immensity and significance of it. Light came his fortune, and lightly it had flown! It seemed to be a pleasant lot enough, at first, to be agent—such an agent as he was, one whom half the county treated as the squire. Some hurts do not begin to disable until we want to use all our strength—and this was one of them. His heart began to harden against Sir Stephen. If he had only done what ordinary good feeling—nay, as it now appeared to his cousin—ordinary *honesty* should have dictated; how smooth the course of true love might have run! Thus mused the man whom Doctor Raynor liked because he didn't cry over spilled milk, the man who had no "rights." Well, there are rights and rights. The doctor was speaking as he walked home with Mrs. Raynor, of such as may be judicially recognised and enforced; and of these Percy Tremayne had none. His wife was thinking of such as bind in conscience and in honor, and which society is not without the means of establishing after a fashion. Let us see how he stands as regards these, as he lights his pipe, and sits down to write to New York as prescribed by Doctor Raynor.

Old Sir William had absolute power over the Wharnstead property. For reasons to be explained hereafter, he decided to disinherit his only son, and to make Percy Tremayne his heir. As such he presented him to the county, as such he bade his servants obey him, as such he gave over to him the sole management of the estate. He had a will drawn up leaving to him everything he possessed—but *he never signed it*. "Any time will do for that;" he told his lawyer, as he locked it up in his desk. He was a hale old man, sound and active—might live another twenty years. He was killed within three, in a railway accident. So everything went *by accident* to the legal heir—the son, and with it, as some held, an obligation to carry out his father's wishes—at least in part. Percy had a "right," they thought, to be handsomely provided for.

Now for the other side. Arguing for Sir Stephen, it was urged that his father had wrongfully condemned him. But for that mistake, he would have lived at Wharnstead as heir apparent, and Percy have never entered its gates. But for that mistake Sir William would not have given instructions for the disinheriting will. The accident of not signing it only put matters right again. Mr. Tremayne had certainly met with a serious disappointment, for which, however, he could blame no one but the dead. For Sir Stephen to divide the property, or anything like that, would simply be to acknowledge that his father had acted justly, and to condemn himself.

So you see the whole thing turns upon the question, "What had Stephen Willford done?"

CHAPTER III.

WITH MAMMA.

"PAPA's got Mr. Tremayne in the study, ma, and I'll bet you anything you like it's all about me."

I repeat the speech which in theatrical parlance "brought on" Bessie in mamma's room upstairs, as Percy was having his half hour with papa below.

Mrs. Raynor had ceased to be astonished at the manner in which her daughter rapped out things about which young people did not talk when that lady was a girl. She only stopped dressing, and tried to find in the face of the speaker some clue to the feelings which followed from this discovery. She might as well have sought them from the photograph on the wall. Not a flush on the broad white brow—not a quiver on the full firm lips. Nothing but the faintest possible contraction of the opal-ringed eyes. The scrutiny over, Mrs. Raynor went on with her toilet, as she didn't know what to say. So Bessie re-commenced.

"I thought p'r'aps papa would ask him to stay and dine, so I put on some war-paint."

"My love! if you only knew how it spoils the complexion, and how vulgar it is to paint."

"You dear, literal, innocent mamma! War-paint isn't rouge. It's this, and this, and this," she laughed, touching silk and gold and lace.

"Would it please you if papa were to ask him to stay and dine?" asked her mother, after a pause.

"Well—eh—yes. He's pretty good fun, but you know he's only a Detrimental."

"A what?"

"A Detrimental."

"What is that?"

"And here," cried Bessie, throwing up her hands in mock amaze, "here is the grown-up mother of two marriageable young women, who don't know what a Detrimental is! Really, mamma, you should be more attentive. Detrimentials—you best of antediluvian parents—Detrimentials are, as a rule, the nicest people out—soldiers, barristers, artists, men in the F. O. and the Treasury, who talk well, and waltz divinely, but haven't got any money. And, mamma, dear, the *very* nicest have such a strange expression—a sort of hunted look—in their faces when they are not talking to you. There's always some money-lender or some dreadful woman after them."

"I hope to goodness, Bessie, you don't go on in this way with Mary?" was her mother's comment upon this lesson.

"Poor dear Mary! Of course not. Detrimentials, in short, are men who can't marry, and may flirt, thus shutting out those who can marry, and want to. Detrimental to matrimony, don't you see? One has to marry something."

"No, my dear, *somebody*."

"Somebody with something, then. Now, Percy Tremayne has not got anything, and is nice, therefore he is a Detrimental."

"Bessie, my child, I wish you would be serious, and candid with me. What has passed between you and Mr. Tremayne?"

"Lots of flowers, and such beauties!"

"Oh, Bessie! when you see that I am serious and anxious! You know very well what I mean. Why, even your father noticed it."

"O—h!" said Bessie, rounding her lips, and arching her brows. "I see! Then

it's papa talking to Percy, and not Percy gone to have it out with papa! My! how I would like to bore a hole through here" (tapping the carpet with the point of her slipper), "and see the fun! Ma, you must know, for you all three came home together: is it papa at Percy, or Percy at papa?"

"Ask your own heart."

"It won't answer. Ma, dear, please leave off struggling with that hair—I'll do it for you presently—and come and sit down here, there's a darling! Now, tell me, what were they talking about as you came along?"

"Percy said he wanted to consult your father about something, that was all."

"So Percy began it. Did he look—like—like—well, like a man who is going to—do anything—desperate?"

"I will not be catechised, Bessie."

"Don't mention catechising, *please*. It reminds me of, Who gave you that name? and, What is your duty to your neighbor? Ma, do you know I once won two dozen of gloves on my duty to my neighbor. I *did*! I couldn't have won it from you, you dear old exact thing! I left a lot out, but he—the fellow who lost the bet—didn't know any better, and paid up."

"And you took what you had not earned?"

"Of course. Men don't bet with girls to win."

"I am sorry that they bet at all on such subjects, and more sorry still that your aunt should allow——"

"Oh, aunty knows what she's about, mamma. If there is only one woman in the world who knows exactly what she is about, it's aunty. She told me all about Percy when he was in London last June. His father was a captain in the navy, and his mother was a countess, who takes in sewing somewhere near Leicester Square. He went to Oxford, got cheated by old Willford, is quite a dear, and has not a sixpence."

"Well, Bessie, I could not presume to contradict such a wonderfully clever person as your Aunt Rose, so let us drop the subject," said her mother.

"But isn't it so?"

"If your Aunt Rose says it is, of course it must be."

"Don't tease. Aunt Rose didn't say so word for word, and one always touches up a little. "Now" (and she ticked off the heads of her questioning on her rosy finger tops as she went on), "his father was a captain in the navy?"

"No; a commander."

"It's all the same. You call a commander a commander, and see how cross he'll be! Well, and his mother was a French Lady?"

"No; an Italian; but you called her a countess just now."

"That was ornamental."

"And the sewing also, I suppose?"

"They were very poor, I heard, dreadfully hard up, especially after Captain Tremayne's death."

"So they were; but the widow did not sew for a living: she painted. Go on."

"And he went to Oxford?"

"Right, for a wonder."

"And was cheated by old Willford?"

"No. Sir William Willford had the best intentions towards him, but died before they were carried out."

"And—what was the next article, ma?" asked Bessie, pausing on her right hand thumb.

"'Is quite a dear,' was what you said," Mrs. Raynor replied, dryly. "If that means he is well born, well educated, well looking, and well behaved, I agree with you; he *is* a dear."

"And hasn't got a sixpence?"

"How many sixpences are there in a thousand pounds?"

"Oh, gracious! Twice twenty, and a thousand times that—why, forty thousand, to be sure."

"Well, he's got a position which is worth what makes this famous Aunt Rose forty thousand times wrong," said her mother, with that calmness which victory gives, and hurts so, when one knows it, for what it is—sugar-coated spite.

"I did not say he had a thousand a year," mused the doctor's wife to herself, as she rose to resume her dressing, "but he may get it soon."

You who are mothers yourselves know what this one is driving at. You would not love an Aunt Rose who had taken your girl from you, and her girlishness from her; had let her win bets on the catechism, and learn so much about Detrimentials. You would scheme a little, I fancy, or even tell a white fib or two to get the child back again, and have her married and settled near you, and out of Aunt Rose's way.

Bessie kept her promise, and "did" her mother's hair, but in a style which called forth repeated protests from that lady.

"Oh! what will your father say?" she cried, as the result was reflected with a hand-glass.

"That you're the prettiest old lady in the county," was the spoiled one's reply.

Then, all at once, and apropos of nothing, she harked back to Percy.

"Aunt Rose says he's a sort of gentleman bailiff to Sir Stephen. Is that true?"

"He manages the estate, and every one treats him as a gentleman. Many young men of excellent family manage estates."

"And get a thousand a year?" said the girl, as though speaking to her own thoughts.

"I'm sure that Percy is very lucky. What with being rent free, and having the run of the garden, and stable, and cellar, and all that, and being so looked up to."

"Ah! but how long will it all last?"

"Years and years."

"Suppose Sir Stephen were to come home, and manage for himself?"

"My dear, he mustn't," Mrs. Raynor replied, dropping her voice.

"Mustn't come back to his own house!"

"No, dear."

"Why not?"

"Because he is bound not to do so."

"I don't understand. I can't make this out a bit," said Bessie, getting more excited than her mother had seen her for many a day. "First you tell me that old Sir William did not cheat Percy, but wanted to give him everything; and then you make out he is only managing the place on a salary, and Sir Stephen mustn't come back, and—what *does* it all mean, mamma? If Wharnstead really belongs

to Sir Stephen, why may he not come and live there. I thought he went abroad because his father made him, and stayed away because he didn't like England."

"He stays away because he must."

"But why—why?"

"It's too long a story to tell you now, my dear. He cannot come back as long as Mr. Dennis lives."

"Mr. Dennis! What on earth has he to do with it? I thought that the Dennises and the Willfords were sworn enemies from generation to generation, and did not speak?"

"Did Mrs. Rose tell you so?"

"Now it's no use pretending she's wrong again there. Long before I went to London I heard you and papa talking about it—about the law suit."

Mrs. Raynor, who had begun to look alarmed, gave a sigh of relief.

"That did not mend matters; but the trouble was of older standing. I could not tell you all the details, even if I wanted to, for I'm not clear about them myself; but this much is certain—Sir Stephen cannot come to Wharnstead as long as Mr. Dennis lives. Poor Percy behaved admirably under the circumstances, and tried his best to make peace, but Mr. Dennis was resolute."

"I hate resolute people. It's only another word for spite married to obstinacy; but I'm glad Percy behaved well."

"And it was against his own interests—mind that."

"Of course. He'd be nobody if the other returned. Does pa know all about it?"

"Yes."

"I'll make him tell me."

"You can ask him."

"If Percy had gone on as he began at Oxford, he would be somebody now," Bessie mused.

"Oh, my child! be frank with your mother. Has anything passed between you? Do you love him?"

"Don't you think, mamma, that I had better not answer such a question till he asks it? Did girls, when you were young, go to their mothers and say that they loved their—somebodies, before their somebodies asked them? Wouldn't it be

slightly awkward if the somebody didn't ask after all?"

"I shall not seek to force your confidence, dear," replied Mrs. Raynor. "You can keep it for your Aunt Rose."

"That's unkind!"

"As you will. It's the last word I shall say on the subject."

She turned aside, and the next thing that happened surprised her. Her daughter's arms were round her neck, and a hot, tear-stained face pressed against her bosom.

"Oh, darling! you don't know what a hateful thing I am. I know what's good and right, and I know what seems pleasant, and—and——"

"Hush! hush! Bessie. What is right is always pleasant in the end."

"Ah! but the end is always so far off—dim, so doubtful."

"I didn't find it so when I married your father."

"You were the dearest old Darby and Joan," said Bessie, dashing aside her tears, and relapsing into her old reckless way; "and had lovely children, and got to be very nicely off, and all that. Only times have changed. It's nice to have one's things made to order; they fit better, though one has to wait for them, and try on, and find fault, and take a lot of trouble. But one likes a ready-made fortune, mamma dearest. Girls begin now a length or two ahead of where their mothers finished."

"I think I understand you, Bessie, and I'm sorry."

"For me?"

"Yes, dear, for you. I have noticed, and so has your father, the marked attention Mr. Tremayne has paid you; and certainly your conduct towards him has not been that of one who did not appreciate it."

"Speak out—say I have flirted."

"No. I will not say anything so light. I say that you have treated him unfairly. It may be fashionable; but it's unkind, untrue, unwomanly."

"Why, what have I done?"

"You have given him every encouragement."

"Well?"

"Enough of this! You have vexed me, and made me say more than I intended. Go your own way, child. Hark! What was that noise?"

"The hall door."

"Then he has gone."

"Who?"

"Why, Percy."

"And papa has not asked him to dinner! I hope he has got something to eat at home."

"Home! Poor fellow! What a home!"

"I think Wharnstead would make a delightful home—with all things in proportion," said Bessie.

The doctor's dinner circle was a wide one. Grown-up Mary, grown-up Bessie, a "man" son from Cambridge, and two boys from school. The talk was of the decorations we know of; and before their repast was over, the rector came in to have a serious conversation with Bessie.

The rector was a slim little man, with no-colored hair, furtive eyes, and a weak chin, which he was constantly prospecting with a finger and thumb, as though doubtful that it had not got away somehow. Bessie had gone too far, he said. He had really not contemplated anything so elaborate when he gave his consent. That cross, now. He was not at all sure that people would like that cross. Might he venture to have it taken down, for he was afraid that the bishop——"

"That for the bishop!" cried Bessie. "Wait till next September, and I'll show him. I'll have a Harvest Home, with full choral service, and a cross of wheat and poppies five times as big, and he shall preach the sermon!"

"I am so sorry; but I really think I must insist," began the rector.

"Pull down my cross, and I'll pull down all the rest," said Bessie, folding her arms.

Then the rector tried to mount the high horse. He was not accustomed to be spoken to like that. He allowed no interference in his church, etc., etc. But the stirrups were too lofty, and he never reached the saddle.

Bessie wheedled. How could so clever a man allow himself to be talked over by a lot of *old* women. She (Bessie) knew who had been interfering. It was those two old cats, the Tompkins, and that odious Susan Price—jealous because they had not had a finger in the pie. Then she told him of a bishop who had taken her into dinner once in London, and was so nice; who talked decorations, and said it was the *duty*—those were his very words—the duty of young ladies to make the churches pretty at Christmas.

They were left alone for this discussion. The doctor retired to his study to smoke, and thither his wife followed. She had not eaten the dinner of a red-breast, in her anxiety to know what Percy Tremayne had said. "Had he proposed for Bessie?"

"Well, yes, and no," said her better-half; and then they told each other what had passed upstairs and down.

"I'm afraid she don't care a pin for him," said mamma.

"The more fool she," growled papa. "Is there any one else?"

"I'm afraid not," sighed mamma. "I'm afraid she thinks of nothing but herself."

CHAPTER IV.

THE DENNISES AND THE WILLFORDS.

THE Dennises and the Willfords had been neighbors for more than a century, and never friends. They were of about the same standing in the county, of about the same means, and had about the same following—each in his way. This had not been always so. The Willfords were famous for going with the times. They never exactly "ratted" in the vulgar way, or changed their course in the eyes of all observers; but somehow were always ready with sails trimmed, to catch the breeze that was coming. They had been prerogative men with Charles I.; shining lights under the Protectorate; cavaliers with the merry Monarch; orange of the deepest dye when his brother ran away, and threw the great seal into the Thames. Afterwards they had been Whig and Tory alternatively, with great success, and when

clever people began to see that there was a great future for the Nonconformists, the Sir William Willford so often mentioned, returned to the faith of his great grandfather. Every change feathered the Willford nest. They got their Baronetcy from James II., a rich patent office for three generations from Marlborough, a seat in Parliament from Pitt, and a bishoprick from Lord Melbourne. They were "smart," these Willfords.

The Dennises were wild, but lucky. I am sorry—as a moral writer—to say that their rise was due more to luck than good management. They had a talent for getting into political hot water. If the water was not hot already, they heated it. They went for the old Pretender; were out in the '45; were Wilkites, Reformers, Radicals—everything that was unprofitable—but they prospered. Under a lot of scrub land (which at one time was worth nothing an acre) was discovered coal and iron-stone, and the more was dug out, the more was found behind. As they prospered, they steadied down. In the race of life the more weight you carry, the faster you go.

The Reform Bill cost the Willfords their seat in Parliament. Previous to 1832, Wharnstead was a borough, and had three voters—the butler, the head game-keeper, and their master. The election took place in the great dining-room. The butler proposed and the game-keeper seconded the squire or his nominee. Nothing could be simpler or more unanimous. No trouble, no speechifying, no chance of a petition. Wharnstead went glimmering into the things that were in company with Gatton and Old Sarum. King's Morton was given a member, and chose a Dennis, and kept him for years, until late in our own times, when the party of the sitting member got into trouble, and a seat, more or less, became a matter of importance. Of all the safe seats, King's Morton was considered the safest. The candidate had only to be a Dennis, to walk over. Sir William Willford was strong amongst the dissenters in the town, but the country was Dennis to a man.

The nomination—(there were nomina-

tion days then, and eggs for unpopular candidates), was fixed for a Wednesday. On the previous Monday, Mr. Dennis went down to his committee-room, earlier than usual. No one had yet arrived. The post had come in, and there was a pack on the table addressed to him by name. He opened it, and out fell a huge poster, printed in red letters, a foot high. Some new phase of DENNIS FOR EVER! or VOTE FOR DENNIS—he thought—a proof of which the printer had submitted. But inside the wrapper was a letter which ran thus:

"Five hundred copies of the enclosed will be posted to-morrow *if necessary*—one on your gates.

"RETRIBUTION."

The huge poster was an invention of the enemy then. He picked it up, spread it out, and read one of the shortest commandments in the decalogue. It had nothing to do with murder or stealing. He had killed no woman's peace of mind, or stolen the rights of any man. He was a happy father—a proud and true husband, and yet the sight of those words made his heart sick, and sent his blood creeping cold, and then surging like fire through his veins.

Twelve years before this, a worn-out adventurer, a thing that had not even passion as an excuse, won a friendless girl who had a small fortune. He spent her money, and he wrecked her life. This done, he abandoned her, and finding it convenient for another matrimonial speculation to die, he departed this vale of tears, and started again in life under another name. His widow became Mrs. Dennis, and had her reward. His wife (No. 2) gave him his, by eloping with a sergeant in the Life Guards. Then the scoundrel saw that there was something to be made out of No. 1, but it was rather late. He had about half one lung left, and was familiar with snakes. If you do not know what "snakes" can do for a man, read *Mrs. Skaggs' Husbands*, by Bret Harte. But he did all the mischief he could. He told a tale which cross-examination could

have torn to rags, got ten pounds to hold his tongue as to what was really true (in that he had lied in saying, four years ago, that the devil had got his own) spent the money in brandy, and got one snake too many.

The threatened suit for a divorce died with the petitioner, but it so happened that a clerk in the office of his attorney (with whom, by-the-by, he broke faith by taking those ten pounds) "bittered himself" and took service with the Parliamentary Agents who acted for Sir William Willford. The ruling maxim of this young man was *succeed*—never mind how, and there was a *douceur* of a hundred guineas to be got by succeeding at this election.

What share—if any—Sir William had in dragging its hidden skeleton out of his opponent's happy home, was never rightly measured. After the mischief was done, he wrote what some of his friends called "a very handsome letter," to Mr. Dennis, in which he declared upon his honor that he ignored, repudiated, and deplored what had happened.

"Can you fight it down?" asked the chairman of John Dennis's committee, to whom, as in duty bound, he showed the placard and accompanying threat.

"Yes," he said, "*but it would kill my wife.*"

"The scoundrel writes he will post a copy on your gate. He strikes at you through her."

"And she—God help me!—does not even *yet* know that her first husband was alive when we married. It was all kept from her. We were married abroad, and I pretended that it would be better for the child we expected, for us to go through a civil marriage in England. She considered it as a mere form to record the religious ceremony. What is to be done?"

What indeed! There are some loathsome creatures crawling about this fair world, which become more loathsome yet, as we crush the life out of them. There are forms of cowardice which ennoble. John Dennis took the only safe course. What to him was party or prestige in comparison to a loved and loving wife's peace? He withdrew his name as a can-

didate for the honor of representing the free and independent electors of King's Morton, and the lord of Wharnstead won the prize of his life.

The reason given for Mr. Dennis's retirement was that the health of his wife required them to live in a milder climate for the next two years at least. The doctors had ordered her to the south of France or Madeira, and this was perfectly true. She had been ailing for some time, but was one of those cheerful, uncomplaining women, whom cheerfulness and pluck kept up to the last. She made the doctors promise not to tease her husband; she would get strong again in the spring. As good luck would have it, Doctor Raynor dropped into the committee-room that morning on purpose to catch Mr. Dennis, and tell him he could no longer obey his wife, and keep her real condition from him. If she passed another winter in King's Morton he would not answer for the consequences. This settled it.

But a political party does not like to be thrown over at the last moment. Why had not "Dennis for Ever" found out this before? A pretty time to resign! What were madam's lungs to Mr. Swop, the grocer, who was looking for a place in the excise for his son-in-law; or to Mrs. Stamper, who hoped that her vote would get her an extra twenty pounds a year for keeping the post office? There was plenty of grumbling, speculation, and surmise, and at last the miserable truth oozed out, the opposite of heaven knows how. Perhaps the young man from Great George Street, intoxicated by success—or gin—had boasted of his cleverness; perhaps the printer of the placard could not keep a secret.

The scandal became public property, and then, and not till then, did Sir William Willford ignore, repudiate, and deplore it. It reached its object, and to his dying day John Dennis believed that his prophecy was a true one—that it killed her. Certain it is that her malady took a severer form soon afterwards, notwithstanding her removal to a warmer clime, and the summer sun, which was to have made her stronger, shone only on her grave.

In the meantime the inevitable defence had been made, and the equally inevitable reaction followed. Sir William found that his triumph was a dear one. Only a select band believed he had nothing to do with that placard. He was just one of those cold-blooded, self-righteous men, who could do such a thing, and think that he had pleased God thereby. Besides, he bore several grudges against Dennis.

This takes us back to the first feud in the present generation—between Dennis and Willford.

A Willford had once owned those lands full of hidden coal and ironstone, from which Dennis now drew the greater part of his wealth. A railroad company, of which Sir William was a director, wanted a thin slice of them, and the owner was obliged to sell; but when it came to making a title, not a scrap of parchment would John Dennis produce. Sixty years adverse possession—two hundred and sixty, if required—was his title. If they liked it, they could take it, and if they didn't, they could let it alone. He did not want to sell. They took the land, and filed a bill in Chancery against him, to force a disclosure of deeds which they averred did, would, should, and ought to exist, and if not, why not, and how otherwise? But he beat them. Sixty years adverse possession is a mighty good title to hold by—the railroad company did not want a better—but its director had found out something which suited him to follow up. Its attorney had unearthed an old deed of grant made by King James I. of blessed memory (did he not root up witchcraft, and put out all the tobacco pipes?) to one, Stephen Willford, of an estate which included the lands now in question. The high Court of Chancery was prayed to make John Dennis play a parchment against that. "Sixty years adverse possession," repeated John Dennis, as doggedly as Samuel Jones, his attorney, could put it; and "bill dismissed, with costs," said the Master of the Rolls.

The case made quite a stir in King's Morton, and people took sides. The railway—it was soon discovered—was but the stalking horse. The real fight was Will-

ford against Dennis. There was the Wouldn't-ites and the Couldn't-ites. It's absurd said the Wouldn't-ites, to expect a man of John Dennis's position to rake out the contents of his monument chest at the will and pleasure of a common carrier, because he wants a beggarly acre or two of his land. He's quite right to refuse. My dear sir—whispered the Couldn't-ites—you may rest assured that if this young man was *able* to comply with the company's demand, he would be very glad to do so. What? a county gentleman content to show no better title than a gipsy squatter! Depend upon it there is a screw loose somewhere.

But the young man stuck to his text "I am the grandson and heir-at-law of John Dennis, who was the eldest son and heir-at-law of another John Dennis, and that's enough. My great grandfather, my grandfather and I, have held this land against all the world. Anyone who buys it of me can do the same. This is the ground I take—move me if you can." And they couldn't.

John Dennis had only recently come into his property, and young as he was, was married. His father had died in his grandfather's lifetime, and he had had a minority of some five years during which the Willfords enjoyed undisputed sway. It made Sir William sore to think that one of the first acts of "that forward boy," as he called his hereditary rival; was to beat him. Well, they might have a return match—that was some consolation. There was a possibility of picking holes even in the Statute of Limitations, and time might show where that reputed loose screw was. He named a son (who was born to him about this time, after some years of matrimony unblest with male issue) Stephen, after king James' grantee. There was luck he thought in the name. One Stephen Willford had obtained the property, and another might regain it. Regain not only those "beggarly acres," lately in question, but the whole rich estate. When he grew up that Stephen Willford the second should study the law, and find out the weak joint in the enemy's coat of mail, if it had not been discovered before.

If you have skipped this episode, you had better turn back and read it; or shut up the book. According to the Statute of Limitations a man who has held land as his own for twenty years against everyone able to turn him out, acquires an absolute right to it. Infants *i.e.* young ladies and gentlemen under age, are not "able" litigants. Add forty to the twenty and you provide against two generations of possible minors, and are pretty safe. Now the Willford who took that royal grant died in the year 1626. The statute aforesaid does not "run"—as the lawyers say—against people who live "beyond the seas." They also are not "able," but this exception did not help the family at Wharnstead for four generations of them had been born and died there.

Under these circumstances Sir William's lawyers advised him to give up all thoughts of ousting John Dennis; but the hope, born of the wish, remained; until he became almost a monomaniac upon the subject and made a genealogist of his heir as soon as he could read.

The "forward boy" won his law-suit, and jumped over his elder rival's head into the high places which his forefathers had filled, one after the other M.P. for King's Morton, chairman of the County Sessions, High Sheriff of the county—to say nothing of master of the county fox hounds which was not in Sir William's line. Baronet as he was, this gentleman found that he had to "take a back seat,"—and he did not like it. He was known to have done several dirty things in a strictly pious way to people whom he did not like; so that when the electioneering scandal we know of, came out, a good many people shook their heads, and even his own party wished he had spoken sooner.

His first impulse was certainly not to deplore the news. If it were true young John Dennis was illegitimate, there would be no male Dennis left to defend the coveted wealth when his father died. This amicable hope was nipped in the bud when all the facts came out, and the second marriage was proved. Nor was his first act to repudiate the young man from Great George street. He did not have

him ducked in the nearest horse-pond and kicked out of the town. He did not report him to his employers so that they might discharge him from their service as they would certainly have done; and he *did* give him the price of his success.

"No understrapper," said John Dennis, through his clenched teeth, when he had signed his resignation, "would dare do such a thing without permission, and as there is a God above me! I'll bring his master to a bitter reckoning. Some day I'll have him on the hip, and then——"

No one who could have seen the face of the speaker would have liked to change places with Sir William Willford.

After the death of his wife Mr. Dennis returned to his old home and for the sake of his children resumed his position in the county—all but the seat for King's Morton. Nothing would induce him to contest that. Young John might, when he came of age; his father—never.

So things went on quietly enough until Stephen Willford and young John Dennis were both in their twenty-first year. Sir William was a man of sixty—John Dennis the elder twenty summers his junior, and rode to hounds like a boy. The baronet's mania for forcing the Squire's title had only increased with his age. The Squire had not forgotten his vow. Only a spark was required to light up the old feud, and this was struck just six years and a month before Percy Tremayne wrote that letter to New York.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE HIP.

WHEN the Dennis-Willford feud burst out again, young John (usually called Jack) Dennis, was a full sub-lieutenant of light dragoons, and Stephen Willford a law student in his second year. The two young men had been brought up as differently as only sons—both heirs of fine estates—could possibly be. A boy, in the estimation of Sir William, was a sort of unconvicted criminal, who, unless watched, confined, and coerced, would give way to

the original sin within him, and go straight to perdition. A boy, according to Mr. Dennis, should be trusted, and left to rough it a little on his own account, so that if there were any vice in him, it might show itself, and be dealt with before it took root. Under these systems, Jack joined the depot of his regiment a smart young officer, for whom snares of ordinary construction were spread in vain; and Stephen went to the Middle Temple a perfect greenhorn. Jack, familiar with the use of money since he was at school, knew when to keep it and when to spend it, like a gentleman; Stephen, obliged to account for every half-crown of an inadequate allowance, was forced into deceit to cover over unrighteous disbursements, and into practices which would have thrilled his father with horror to the core, to provide ways and means for even harmless expenditure. Jack had bought experience by retail; Stephen was "let in for it" all at once.

Playing cards and betting were Sir William's favorite detestations. He hoped that by keeping his one ewe lamb short of cash, he would take the best means to keep his little fleece unspotted. Alas for such precautions! By this time Master Stephen had a book upon the principal events of the Turf, and was a professor of "Loo."

Playing "Loo" is an expensive accomplishment—doubly expensive. It is an accomplishment which costs a good deal to acquire, and acquired, becomes expensive to some one else, when played as Master Stephen played it. He had cast his bread upon the waters—in the shape of taking Miss second-hand, and standing upon a ten of trumps, in his unsophisticated days—and it at last came back to him in pools provided by others. He now played a patient, cool game, and cultivated a fine scent for parties on which his skill would be likely to prevail. There was a good deal of "Loo" playing in the Temple in Michaelmas Term, 1868.

An old schoolfellow of Jack Dennis was then called to the Bar. He had known Jack "at home," had shot many a partridge and pheasant on Mr. Dennis's land,

and was a prime favorite with that gentleman. You are "called" after dinner, and give a card-party, but your friends who are not of your Inn of Court may not dine with you. They come in when the Benchers have retired, drink your health, and usually adjourn to your chambers, and—make a night of it. Jack got leave, and came up from Canterbury to do his chum honor, and see how he looked in his wig.

"You're safe to be Lord Chancellor," he said, slapping Chris Tomlyn on the back, as they left the grand old hall, "if you look as wise and that for another forty years."

As he spoke, a fellow student of the coming judge sidled up, and asked leave to bring a friend. "Very nice person—good family and that; son of Sir William Willford, of Wharnstead."

The speaker was a known tuft-hunter, and had himself sponged for an invitation, but, really, if a man cannot be friendly on his "call" night, when can he be? Permission was given, and a general flank movement to Chris Tomlyn's chambers was made in good order.

Dessert discussed, and coffee over, the decks were cleared, and tables drawn out. Some sat down to whist, some preferred to talk, and others called for "Loo." The host was, by preference, a whistite, but sacrificed himself to make a party for the livelier game. They sat down, seven—mine host, Jack Dennis, Stephen Willford, his introducer, Mr. Steadman, a rather noisy barrister, named Plowden, and two others, named respectively Stark and Berresford. Now Jack and Stephen, though of course not on friendly, were on bowing terms—as indeed their fathers were—so that this meeting on neutral grounds was not embarrassing to either.

They began mildly—sixpences up, and the dealer eighteenpence—four and sixpence the "Loo," nine shillings two "Loos," and so on; quite enough for fun. But even so the noisy barrister lost several pounds, and swore that the —— was in the cards. Hadn't Chris another pack? Chris had, and laughingly produced it, saying,

"It's the same pattern, though, and won't do you much good, I'm afraid, es-

pecially if you go on playing upon nothing."

"I shall play as I like, confound you!" said the victim, in good humor. "You win, and mind your business."

"Oh, I haven't won. No one has won much but Mr. Willford."

"You generally *do* win, I think," said Berresford, who had evaded an introduction to Stephen when the party assembled.

There was some horse play with the discarded pack, which got tossed about (a fair quantity of champagne had been tossed, too), but were eventually gathered up, placed on a sideboard, where a flask of iced water stood, and on went the game with their successors of the same pattern.

"Didn't I tell you there was no luck in that other pack?" laughed Plowden, as he landed two-thirds of a good pool. "Now these are excellent cards."

"When you hold the queen and knave," Willford replied, "most cards are."

He was by no means a winner now. That queen and knave "Looed" him and another for three pounds each.

For this unusually rich pool there were four players, and another two Loos followed. Twelve pounds in the pool! Unprepared for such a rise, they had agreed to play "club law," which means, my dear uninitiated readers, that every one must play when a club is turned up trumps. As there are only three tricks, there must be at least four Loos—with seven players—when all are "in." Clubs came up. Four Loos, four times twelve — forty-eight pounds in the pool, and Plowden happy!

Stephen Willford got up, crossed the room, and took a glass of iced water, whilst the cards were shuffled for the next deal.

Chris Tomlyn was dealer. Berresford was first hand, Steadman next, Willford next, then Plowden, Jack Dennis, and Stark, in their order, as I have named them.

"I don't play," said Berresford.

"I will," said Steadman.

"So do I," said Willford.

"Nothing to do with it," said Plowden.

Jack rapped on the table, and turned down his cards.

"Three players," said the dealer.

"Settle it amongst yourselves," said Stark, throwing up his hand.

Willford "played his own," Jack drew two cards, and so did Steadman.

"Well, I hope you fellows will divide," said the host, "this has got too high for amusement."

There are various rules of "Loo." Those which this party played were: 1st. If you have the ace and the lead, lead it. 2nd. If you have two trumps lead the highest. 3rd. Beat the card played before you if you can. 4th. Always follow suit. 5th. When you have won a trick, lead a trump if you have one.

The nine of diamonds was the trump.

"Curse of Scotland!" cried Plowden, "no luck for me."

And he was right. He had two small spades, and the king of hearts. No use going in on that.

The big pool caused a silence, and some of those who were not in the whist, gathered round to see it lost and won.

"Sixteen pounds a trick," said Plowden, "go it."

Steadman played the knave of spades. *He* hadn't two trumps.

Willford trumped it with the ten of diamonds.

Jack threw down the king of spades.

"One for Willford. Trump after trick," said Plowden getting excited. "Now comes the tug of war."

Willford played the ace of trumps.

Jack exclaimed, "The dev—" stopped short, and got very pale.

"What a hand!" said Plowden. "If it had been his lead, he'd have Looed the lot. Go on old man (this to Jack) you can't beat the ace of trumps."

"Of course not—if—Look here, Chris, there's some mistake."

"No mistake at all," cried impatient Plowden. "Steadman led a spade, Willford trumped it, you played your king. Now Willford leads the ace of diamonds. Do go on."

"I hold that card," replied Jack very quietly, "and here it is!"

As the playwrights have it—TABLEAU! If a bomb shell had fallen on the table,

it could not have produced a greater effect than did that second little red figure in the centre of a harmless piece of pasteboard.

"The pack must be wrong," gasped the host. "I'm so sorry! Is it possible we have been playing with two aces of diamonds, without knowing it?"

It was possible. In "Loo" the pack is never dealt out. With seven players only, more than thirty-one cards are seldom needed, including the trump. It was just possible. Chris counted. Fifty-two. Then what card was missing. He laid them out in suits. There was no three of clubs.

"I'll tell you how it is," said Chris, "when you fellows were larking with the old pack, the ace of diamonds must have got mixed up somehow—left on the table I suppose—with the new ones."

"Then where's the three of clubs," asked Berresford, the cynic.

As though by common consent all rose to look for it.

They found it under Stephen Willford's chair with the marks of the sole of a boot upon it.

There was a dead silence.

Plowden took up the other pack and examined it.

"No ace of diamonds here!"

"Well, I suppose we must play the hand over again," said Steadman.

"No, no," cried several at once. "This must be cleared up first."

"I shall certainly decline to play any more until it is," said Berresford.

"Really, really," expostulated Steadman—"amongst gentlemen"—

"The best may make a mistake," the cynic interrupted, "but there is no *mistake* here."

"By which, I suppose, you mean to insinuate that we are not all gentlemen?" said Willford, who had stood in sullen silence since the discovery of the card under his chair.

"I never insinuate," was the cutting reply, more to the company than the inquirer. "What I have to say I speak out; and I say this:—I will not sit down again with Mr. Willford."

"You made another spiteful remark before we began," muttered Willford

through ashen lips. "Why accuse me? It's between Mr. Dennis and myself. Do you refuse to play with Mr. Dennis?"

"No, sir."

"And you call that fair?"

"Look here! fair is fair—if you come to that," interposed Plowden. "Mr. Dennis sat opposite to me, drank his liquor, and smoked his bacca like a man. He didn't get up for water, or *anything else*."

Then all remembered that Willford had gone for water, to the very spot where the discarded pack was.

"I'll answer for my friend," cried Steadman. "Tuft hunter as he was, he could be loyal to his tuft."

"And I for mine," said Chris.

All this time Jack Dennis had not said a word. It never struck him that he had to say anything. The mere possibility that he could be suspected of cheating never occurred to him. Not even when Willford said it was between them. There was some mistake. He thought it rather an impertinence of Mr. Plowden to take his part. But after all—it was no business of his. He was a stranger to all but one. Let them fight it out amongst themselves. So he lit a cigar.

"You are all against me. I wish I'd never come," growled Willford. "I had that ace fairly, and I've a right to two-thirds of that pool."

"Let him take it," cried four voices, "and go."

"No, I wont; but if you like I'll play the hand over again."

"That is out of the question," replied the host. "Let every man withdraw his stake, and——"

"You shall hear from me about this, Mr. Tomlyn," Willford muttered.

"As you please, sir."

"Oh, I say, Chris, can't this be stopped?" It was Jack who spoke. "Mr. Willford is a neighbor of ours, as you know. Our governors ain't good friends and that, but—hang it! he's a gentleman. I don't suppose he'd be here if he wasn't. There's some mistake. Why, suppose that card had been found under *my* chair! Would any man dare to—to—Oh! there's some mistake."

Dead silence!

"Well, it's no use staying here, Steadman," said his friend. "It will be a lesson to me not to play cards again with people who don't know how to lose their money."

"And with me not to play with those who know too well how to win other people's," said Berresford, as the door closed behind the pair. "My dear fellow," the speaker added to his host, "I know him. He always wins. And the event of to-night throws a curious light upon something I heard yesterday. He has young fellows to play in his own rooms, and his cards are always of the same pattern. Take your change out of *that*!"

"It's a bore to have one's night broken up, by such a skunk," Plowden loquitur. "What do you say? It's early yet. Shall we play that hand again without him?"

"Certainly we will."

And to it they fell, until the small hours.

* * * * *

John Dennis wrote to the newly-fledged counsel, congratulating him on his "call," and wishing him every success in the profession he had chosen.

In reply—for want of anything else to say, after thanks for good wishes—Chris wrote:—

"I suppose Jack has told you all about the rather unpleasant scene we had at my call party. I must own that at first I was sorry for young Willford, but have heard things since which make me fear he is a bad lot. I didn't like his trying to drag Jack into it. I say 'trying' because, although Jack was a stranger to everybody but myself, no one could look at him for a moment and think *he* could cheat at cards."

This was intended to make things pleasant for Jack; but it brought Jack's father up to town by the night express in a fury.

"Let it blow over!" he exclaimed, repeating his son's conclusion, when the whole story was told. "These things never blow over. They blow about, get magnified, distorted, and jump up again when you least expect them. Blow over! Would you leave the bite of a mad dog to

blow over? I know these Willfords. In a week or two their names will have slunk out of it, and yours be left in. The scandal will go from mouth to mouth, and some day it will be, 'Oh! Dennis of the —th—I know; man who was mixed up in a card case in the Temple!' Good God, Jack! Mixed up in a card case! That's what will be said—only that; but the implication is mixed up in it as the cheat."

"I should like to hear any one say so!" Jack broke out.

"They don't *say* so. Be quiet. You cannot settle those sort of things with fists, or even pistols. I asked you just now, would you leave the bite of a mad dog to 'blow over?' No; you would burn it out as soon as ever you could heat an iron hot enough."

"But you see, dad," Jack observed, "I'm not bitten. None of the men said a word against me—ask Chris—and we went on playing when Willford left without the slightest trouble, and parted the best of friends. Don't you think that, under all the circumstances, it would be as well to let the fellow alone. *Qui s'excuse—s'accuse.*"

"You were a set of young fools to let him off so easily. If one of you had kicked him down stairs, it would have been all right. I'm old enough to be your father, Jack, and I know the world you live in. It don't bring logic and French proverbs to bear on these cases; it supplies rougher tests, and judges by results. It don't ask, if they turn up again, who was right and who was wrong. It wants to know who had his nose pulled, or was expelled his club, or obliged to leave the country. If you can say, or your friends say for you, 'Yes, there was a card case in the Temple; Dennis of the —th, and Stephen Willford each held the ace of diamonds, and the latter's name was struck off the books of the Inn'—why, then you're safe. If you go upon your *blow over* principles, the least that will happen is for you both to be set down as blacklegs. Good God, Jack! Suppose it were to come to your colonel's ears, what would he say? I know. He'd hear you out, and then say, 'Well, sir, what have you done?'"

"What am I to do?"

Easy-going Jack hated the idea of making a fuss; but felt that his father was right. Something had to be *done*.

"State the case to the benchers of his Inn, and the committee of his club—if he have one," replied Mr. Dennis, "as a commencement. When we know what they think of it, we shall be able to judge what else should follow."

CHAPTER VI.

BANISHED.

MR. STEADMAN was a small individual, with what he was pleased to consider large responsibilities. Any little pie into which he could manage to wriggle a finger, assumed in his eyes the dimensions of a royal pasty of exquisite flavor, and for which the mouth of all mankind were watering. His wit, like some rare vintages, required time to ripen; and thus it was that his choicest repartees, his most sarcastic thrusts, were produced the next morning, in the absence of their intended victim.

When he sought his couch on the night of Mr. Tomlyn's call party, he perceived how completely he might have turned the tables upon those who had assailed his friend. It was rather late, but not too late, to deal the necessary discomfiture. By his diplomacy, Stephen Willford might be pulled through with flying colors. And so he called on Stephen after breakfast. He found him in a curious frame of mind. Not angry with Chris, who had all but shown him the door; not indignant with Plowden, who had rapped out the most serious imputation against him; not seeking satisfaction from the cynical gentleman who had remarked at the outset that he generally *did* win; but furious against Jack Dennis, who alone had said a good word for him.

"How dared he put on those d——d supercilious ways? It was as much against him as me. Does he think that because he's an officer, and wears a fine uniform, that he's to run rough shod over me? Let him look out! I know a good bit more about him than he thinks. D——d

upstart! Let him look out, that's all!" fumed Stephen.

"Now, if you will place the affair entirely in my hands," Mr. Steadman began, first finger on thumb, "I will——"

"Leave me alone," was the ungracious reply; and beyond some further abuse of Jack, the speaker would not return to the subject.

Nevertheless, Mr. Steadman was not to be denied. If Willford did not know his own interests, so much the worse for him. He paid Chris Tomlyn a visit, and put forth all his little diplomacy. An expression of regret, however guarded, would, he felt sure, satisfy his friend. And it was really so desirable for all parties that the matter should be arranged, etc., etc., etc.

Chris thought so too, but at present he had no regret to express, other than that Mr. Steadman should have inadvertently introduced a person who was so unfortunate as to incur the suspicion of every gentleman in the room.

Mr. Steadman had a "happy thought" half an hour afterwards, the result of which would have crushed Mr. Tomlyn to the earth. This was before the arrival of John Dennis.

The next day but one Chris had to return the visit, with Jack's (or rather his father's) ultimatum; and this was a thunder-bolt! The poor little man could not cope with it alone—it was too great a responsibility. To advise—no matter how—would surely get him into trouble. The sane idea that he might wash his hands of it, and leave the principals to fight it out, like the Kilkenny cats, if necessary, never occurred to him. It was one of his responsibilities.

He found out the barrister who had become Stephen's sponsor when he was entered as a student at law, and unbosomed his grief. That gentleman, not being prepossessed with the management of his informant, and, like a sensible creature, unwilling to put his own fingers in the fire, wrote to Sir William, and so it all came out.

The reader has discovered, long before this, that there was some wisdom, but more

spite, in the conclusions of John Dennis. Also, that the evidence against young Willford was far from conclusive. He had got up for water—he seldom drank wine—he went to the place where the rejected pack had been placed; but no one could say that he touched it, and half of them had their faces turned that way. A man who had stolen a good card, and wanted to get rid of a bad one, would hardly drop it under his own chair—would either pocket it, or throw it as far from him as possible. If the cynic had really heard “shady things” of Willford, why did he not warn his friends at once? Why did he sit down to play with a “leg.” If it were a sin to have cards all of the same pattern, Chris Tomlyn—dear, honorable old Chris—was a sinner. A man with any spirit in him would have knocked somebody down.

Well, Stephen Willford had no spirit in him. Any that he might once have had was squeezed out of him by his education. To become a good boy, he was made a sneak; to avoid one sort of temptation as a man, he was left naked and defenceless against the assaults of a dozen. He did play to win. What then? He lived upon his winnings, as any one who wields a steady cue, or plays a steady game, may do, and not forfeit his right to be considered a gentleman. There was a good deal to be said, you see, for Stephen Willford.

But he marred his own defence; was sullen when he should have been frank; vindictive when he ought to have been conciliatory; talked of actions at law, and prosecutions for libel, when the question was one of honor.

His father—aged, as we know, and prejudiced against all sorts of play—gave him no help. A man who would play cards for money (according to Sir William) would cheat at cards for money. To play was to be a gambler—to be a gambler, a blackleg. His son had disobeyed his most earnest, most anxiously-pressed orders. That was bad enough. His son had placed him at the mercy of his hereditary enemy. That was his worst crime. And his hereditary enemy was pushing him home. Something had to be done. Would taking

his name off the books of his Inn suffice? No. The heir of a baronetcy and twelve thousand a year might do that, and no one ask why. He was never intended to make his salt at the Bar. Would a written and signed acknowledgment that Sub-Lieutenant Dennis had played honorably, do? No; that was not required.

Oh! the sting in this refusal! John Dennis the elder was inexorable. What had to be done was to mark Stephen Willford's guilt; and the compact was made for him by one who admitted it, and disowned him. He was to go abroad, and there remain; otherwise his case was to go before the benchers.

Unnatural! unjust! improbable! As you will. This is a novel. If you are reading it openly, if it has been brought home by papa, or ordered from the library by mamma, you have had no personal experience of how the Stephen Willfords of another world than yours are created, or what they may be made to endure. If you are reading it on the sly, you know, perhaps, how unnatural and unjust the sort of “serious person,” like Sir William Willford, can be. His son was completely in his power. No entail, no settlement protected him to the value of a shilling, and there was no disposition to temper that power with mercy.

As soon as Sir William appeared on the scene, the case assumed a new aspect. The principals disappeared—Jack drifted out of it as accuser, Stephen was not heard in self-defence. His own father, acting upon the principle already stated, pleaded guilty for him, and Jack's dictated the sentence.

When this was communicated to Stephen, he became frantic with rage, forced his way into Sir William's presence, upbraided, abused, and, as some said, struck him. Be this as it may, father and son never met again; and Percy Tremayne—the distant cousin—was sent for, to be made heir of Wharnstead.

If the will already mentioned had been signed, Stephen would have received an annuity granted thus:—

To my son Stephen, who, after having

disgraced and humiliated me by indulgence in a sin against which I had made it a life-long duty to warn him, accused me as the cause of his ruin—whose own hand has destroyed the ties of nature between us—who has not the ability to earn a living, or the honesty to deserve an inheritance, but whom I may not, as a Christian, leave to starve—I direct that my executor, do pay as I have done hitherto, pay the sum of two hundred and fifty pounds, by four quarterly payments every year, so long as the said Stephen may continue to reside abroad.

Whether in his secret thoughts Sir William admitted that he had gone the wrong way to work with young men, and determined, however late, to change his course, or whether Percy went the right way to work with him, and would not put up with what his son had endured, matters not. There came a great change over Wharnstead, at which people who had given Percy a six weeks leave of favor, marvelled greatly. He hunted, shot, went to the county ball, and danced. He even ran up to town, avowedly to see the Derby—and came back welcomed!

The best of fathers and mothers sometimes fail to realize the fact that children grow into boys and girls, and these into men and women, with anything like the clearness with which the young people themselves appreciate the change, or provide what the change requires. Stephen Willford gave his parent no assistance in this respect. He was a timid child; a frightened, sly boy; a spiritless, cunning man. He stood a rating, or sneaked to evade one, at twenty as at ten. The wholesome moral tonic of a big school was denied him. There was no break in his home tutelage. So it went on, unmodified by time.

But when Percy came to take his vacant place, there was a break indeed! Without ever failing in proper respect for his patron's age and position, he gave him very clearly to understand that twelve thousand a year would not buy him—that he was to be respected too.

Before long, Sir William got to be a little

afraid of his new heir—so attentive, and yet so independent; so frank, and yet so firm! He was a surprize and a puzzle to him. A public school and Oxford—terrible Oxford!—had left him temperate and moral! He had gone to Epsom without stealing anybody's money, or fighting the police! He was a wonder!

Dr. Raynor was right when he said that Percy Tremayne did not owe his good fortune to any love which Sir William bore him; but in time something as nearly approaching affection as could enter that cold, selfish heart, arose for him, and he deserved all, and more, than he got. I do not mean to say that the Oxford undergraduate developed at once into a Mechi or a Reid, but there was a good deal more content and visible prosperity upon the estate than heretofore. "It is yours—do as you please, I am content," became the baronet's constant reply when consulted as to its management.

Percy did well, and, to his credit be it recorded, put in many a good word for the absent. No power could deprive Stephen of the baronetcy, and although his father had sworn he should never set his foot in Wharnstead, with a vehemence which prevented any return to that subject, there were other lands with which he might support that dignity, and Wharnstead had not always been in the family. Sir William made no direct replies to these hints, but did not taboo the subject.

As for Stephen himself—with two hundred and fifty pounds a year to spend as he liked, and do as he liked—he was probably happier than ever he had been in his life. Shame did not touch him. He had done nothing to be ashamed of. The shame was with those who had condemned him unheard. The heir-apparentship of Wharnstead was not worth having, and as for the succession, he would see about that when the time came. In the pleasant French watering-place which he chose for his abode, he became quite a personage, studied the language, and learned to play *ecarté*.

He would see about the succession when the time came. His idea was to contest an unfavorable will, on the ground of un-

due influence, and the testator's dotage. For this purpose he took careful notes of all that had happened. Would a sane parent disinherit his only son because of a fuss at a card-table, and without enquiring who was to blame? Would a sane person take a young gentleman from the University, who did not know the price of a sheep, and give him the sole management of a great estate? That would be for a jury to decide. When he heard that his father was dead, and had made no will, he thought of burning those notes, but, on second thought, kept them.

What was to be done now? Prepare the ground, and sow seeds for future harvesting, no more for the present. Be very courteous to Percy; pretend that he preferred to live abroad; throw out a few carefully worded suggestions that his poor dear father had repented of his unconsidered condemnation, and leave the rest to time. This Willford was no fool. The family did not produce fools, whatever else it bred. But, oh! sooner or later he would get even with Dennis—father and son. It was in this conviction that he visited the United States of America.

Shortly after the funeral, Percy Tremayne saw Mr. Dennis, and the now three years old trouble was inevitably discussed.

"Surely he can come back now, sir," urged Percy.

"Not yet," Dennis replied, sternly. "As soon as it becomes known that he could not come back at his own pleasure, but had to wait for *mine*, why then perhaps he may. I sympathise with *you*, and admire your conduct, Mr. Tremayne, and trust that, being neighbors, we may become friends, now that it is possible for me to visit Wharnstead."

Jack (a captain now) wrote from Ireland, where he was quartered, to the same effect in his own free and easy way.

"Can't that poor beggar come back now, dad? All ours who were in the regiment at the time, know about it, and they'd as soon take me for a Fenian Head Centre as a card sharper."

But again "*Not yet!*" was the reply.

This brings us down to the day when the letter written by Dr. Raynor's advice was posted to Sir Stephen Willford at New York, and forwarded after him to New Orleans. It ran as follows:

"DEAR SIR STEPHEN,

"Your letter of the 14th inst. was no doubt intended to be kind, but is not satisfactory under the circumstances in which I am placed. The sum you mention in your postscript as spent upon improvements, went, as I informed you at the time, to repair your house, and will not return a shilling unless you rent it. If you require more money than usual next year, you must raise it by sale or mortgage. Your rents, &c., will yield you less than before, because you have to provide for an agent. Sign and return the enclosed agreement with me as such for five years certain, at a salary of one thousand a year, or find some one else this day three months. I do not apologise for stating the case thus dryly. A good agent has to be a man of business.

"Yours faithfully,

"PERCY TREMAYNE."

"D—n his impudence!" growled Sir Stephen. "Dennis has put him up to this, I'll swear. Five years certain! Five thousand pounds! He fancies I'm in his power, and puts on the screw, does he? I'll very soon put him in his place—the beggar! No, that won't do just now. I'll make use of him; write from here as though I had not received his letter. That will gain time. He won't throw up in three months, anyhow—he knows better."

Then the muser locked up his despatch box, and enquired what cars would take him to Goodchildren street, and being enlightened, called at No. 195, and asked if Judge Alexander was at home.

Once a judge, always a judge, in America. Mr. Alexander had occupied the bench for about two years when he was young, and filled a good many other positions since. He had been a cotton broker, a tax collector, a lawyer again, a senator, a minister, and had all but obtained a nomination for President of the United

States. But his party "dried up" and left him stranded where the sweet waters of office never reached him again. He had the reputation of being one of the most profound lawyers and best read men in the country; but that would not get him a clerkship in the humblest of its tribunals. Per contra, he was credited with the possession of a conscience which might be inflamed to use his intellectual weapons in ways that are dark, and this might easily have made him governor of his state in these latter days. But he became idle, cynical, soured, after his great disappointment. Having played for the biggest stake in the game, and lost, he threw up his cards in disgust, retired from the bar and from society, and lived, a lonely sybarite, upon what he had made. It was enough for his wants, and to buy a book or two when something worth his perusal, that he had not read, turned up.

One of his specialties whilst at the bar was pedigree, particularly that of old English families settled in America, when it was His Majesty's plantations. He owed his fortune (such as it was) to the successful prosecution of a long dormant claim, on behalf of the heirs of a ne'er-do-well, who ran away from home when good Queen Anne was yet alive.

The civil war upset all his financial calculations. Hard times came for the owners of property; rents fell, taxes rose, values shrunk, and the wolf came unpleasantly near the door of No. 195, Goodchildren street, at which we also left Sir Stephen Willford knocking. It was opened to him by a gaunt figure in its shirt sleeves, with no socks on its down-at-heel slippered feet, and two days rusty grey beard bristling its chin. A whiff of garlic and tobacco escaped into the outer air, as it asked, "What do you want?" in a tone which implied "Confound you, for wanting anything!"

"I wish to see Judge Alexander. My name is Willford, and I have called by appointment," the visitor replied.

"So! Come in; I have been expecting you for a week," said the figure.

CHAPTER VII.

FROM DIXIE'S LAND.

PERCY TREMAYNE spent Christmas with his mother, and told her all about Bessie, including the steps he had taken, by Dr. Raynor's advice, for obtaining a *pied a terre* from which to woo her.

The Malapropian rule that it is better to begin with a little aversion, seemed to strike Mrs. Tremayne as peculiarly applicable in this case, so far as she was concerned in it as a probable mother-in-law. Sir Stephen might not come to terms, or, if he did, Bessie might not. So she carefully wetted all the various descriptions of blankets which fond parents have used on these occasions, and applied them to her son for the double purpose of damping his present ardor and softening his future fall should Bessie prove unkind. He might hope for better things than land agencies; look higher than the daughter of a country doctor.

"I have heard of that aunt of hers—Mrs. Rose," said the warning voice; "and, unless she is much slandered, it would be a blessing for the girl if all went as you hope, and you married her next month."

You have not forgotten that Percy's mother had been described to Miss Raynor as "a countess who takes in sewing, somewhere near Leicester square;" so that if Mrs. Rose were the informant, it is to be inferred that there was no love lost between the ladies.

There was a time when a pale young widow struggled for bare existence for herself, and comfort for an old man and a child, within sight of the once dilapidated patch which Baron Albert Grant has made beautiful for ever. The old man is long since dead; the child wants to marry Bessie Raynor; the pale widow has just spoken. Instead of wandering, wet and weary, dragging her pictures for sale to dealer after dealer, or sometimes even praying them for the love of God to *lend* her the price of a meal upon the work of a week, she takes her ease in her pretty river-side home, paints when she pleases, and there is a race and a scramble to bid for the result. She is surrounded by things of

beauty and of freshness. Her senses revel in light, and color, and space, in sweet perfumes and soft raiment; for she knows what squalor means. She, who was reared in every luxury, has felt the crushing misery of poverty, with its foul sights, and smells, and sounds; and now she has her revenge.

Years have passed since *Fame* smiled upon her, and with touch of magic wand changed hard bargainers into eager buyers, want into plenty, and gave that quickening vigor to her genius which made her deserve the success she gained. But even now she will run out bare-headed in the morning, take a great gulp of the fresh air, or bury her face in dewy roses, with unuttered, though all-thrilled thankfulness, as though she had not even yet completely realized the change. She is grey and time-worn beyond her years; but her southern blood warms her heart, and kindles her fancy even more now, in the Indian Summer of her life, than when nourishing the early flowers of its spring.

"Mother dear," said Percy, one night as they sat together over the fire, "I wish you would tell me something about our own affairs?"

"I have been disgracefully idle. *Mea culpa!* Idle because I was thinking of my coming boy, and idle because he came," she answered gaily, passing a still white and shapely hand through his hair. "I'll be good when you have gone."

"I was not asking about painting; I want to know more than I do about ourselves—our family."

"To see if we are good enough to mate with a country doctor's ——"

"Don't, mother, please. I know what we are."

"An artist and a land agent. Will that not suffice?"

"If you wish it. But it's rather awkward not to be able to answer observations upon such a subject."

"Who has been making observations? she asked, sharply.

"Well, Doctor Raynor did for one. I turned it off as well as I could; but I've been thinking of it since, and it worries me."

"What did he say?"

"He had one of his snorts about our being proud on your side. He snorts at things he don't like just as a horse does. It's his way. He spoke of my grandfather having lost some property, or some interest, because he would not stoop to claim it.

"And this was whilst you were discussing ways and means about his daughter?"

"Something about pride brought it up?"

"It was an impertinence," said the lady, drawing herself up, and looking as haughty as her own picture of Lady Percy, "which I hope you resented."

"I did not, for he meant no harm. I turned it off with one of his own sayings, 'It is no use crying over spilled milk,' but, mother, it is surely no impertinence in me to ask what every man has—yes, I will put it plainly—a right to know."

She looked him in the face with moistening eyes, then threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"How like your father! Oh, how like your father! His voice, his very manner, his calm, kind sternness when he was in earnest, and yet you were a babe when he died. It seems as though he were speaking from your lips. Listen, and I will tell you all I know. We are of a noble Italian family, ancient, and once rich. We lived in Naples—governed, when I was a girl, by a creature nic-named *Bomba*, whose rule was based upon three instruments—the prison, the bribe, and the bayonet. Your grandfather lived before his time. He was a Rienzi, with no ambition but to do good—a Massaniello of the nobles. He had the winning force of a Garibaldi, and the wisdom of a Cavour; but the world was not ready for him. He lost all for his country, and when others had made it free, it forgot him.

"Your father, who commanded a small ship of war in the bay during some of our troubles, saved his life, and brought us to London. I know no more now than I knew then. We were ruined. He taught and translated his language while he could, and I painted pictures. It was the art of my country, and I loved it for that. I loved it more, as it gave me the means of earning a pittance for those I loved; but,

oh! what a pittance it was. Percy, I bought in one of my early pictures last month at a sale at Christie's—not even a fair specimen, by any means; but I wanted it. It cost me two hundred guineas, and what do you think I had sold it for? Ten shillings! And was glad.”

“Dear old famous mother!”

“Your father was dead then, and the doctors ordered generous wine and good diet for mine. Famous! He was famous, and he perished of want; not want of the mere necessities of life—these, thank God! I could provide—but for want of the pure air, the brain work, the room to stretch his mind and *act*, without which mere corporal existence was nil. If he had rights in his country, he never spoke of them. He never made a show of himself, like some other refugees. Once a large, blue, official letter, with *Palmerston* written on the top corner, came, and I had to answer it at his dictation, for he was too feeble to write. I suppose it was some offer of assistance from the English government, for he replied, ‘Your lordship’s most kind and delicately proffered proposal is thankfully declined.’ That was all. Perhaps it was to this that your friend, Dr. Raynor, alluded.”

“No; I think he meant something proposed for him from abroad.”

“It matters not. Whatever he did was right, depend upon that. If it had been proper to go into particulars, he would have told your father, and he me. You have nothing but your brains and your mother’s savings, Percy.”

“Something more, mother. When you married an Englishman, you took his name, and I am proud of it; but that is no reason why I should not be equally proud of yours. What was it?”

“Cravalli.”

“I shall remember that. And now, mammie dear, we’ll drop the subject. I have a hero and a martyr for my grand-sire, a heroine for a mother, a gallant officer for my father, and, if all go well, a thousand a year for my brains, so you may spend those savings on your precious self, and throw your sketches, paints, and brushes, into the Thames.”

“My art belongs to my country; I will never give it up; it is the only heirloom I have—but one,” she added, with a light smile.

“And what is that one?”

“Inquisitive! A toy—a *curio*, as you would say. You shall see it before you go. Now, one word more and I have done. Have you built on this idea which Doctor Raynor put into your head? Are you disappointed? Tell me frankly. In the glamour of your Bessie’s eyes have you ever dreamed of being a bold baron, living in marble halls, with vassals and serfs by your side?”

“I have not seen Miss Raynor since the doctor mentioned the subject,” Percy replied, somewhat drily.

“How like your father! Well, Mr. Precise, let that part of my question pass, and answer the other. Have you built on this, or are you disappointed?”

“Not a bit,” he laughed. He did not like to be teased about Bessie’s eyes when his mother was in fun. Now that a tinge of anxiety softened her voice, it was quite a different thing. “How could I? Am I not a born Cockney? I suppose Bow Bells can be heard from Leicester Square, when the wind is favorable? One may like to know about one’s grandfather, without hankering after marble halls. Besides, I have learned the wisdom of the proverb, ‘Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed,’ he added, somewhat bitterly.

“Percy,” said his mother, taking his hand, “you know my opinion about Wharnstead, and so I will not repeat it. I believe in justice. If I did not, I should become a very wicked woman, suffering as I and mine have suffered. I am not thinking of the justice of courts of law, or of kings and governments, but a higher mode of righting wrongs. I believe that all we have lost will be restored to us some day—but this is no reason why we should not work for ourselves whilst it is on the way.”

“‘Trust in Providence, my lads, but keep your powder dry,’” Percy quoted.

“Exactly.”

“If you were only the seventh daughter

of a seventh daughter!" he said, kissing the hand that held his own. "Take up your parable, and prophesy that I shall be happy."

"I will pray that you may be. Did I tell you," she said, after some pause, and in a changed tone, "that I expected visitors to-morrow?"

"No; but that is not news—you have plenty of visitors."

"These will stay here some days. To any one else I should say *garder vous!*"

"Oh, ladies!"

"A lady and her brother. You will like him, and she—if you were a free man, I should fear she might carry your heart, or you, back to America with her."

"They are Americans, then?" said Percy, as a man would say, "What bores they will be."

For untravelled Percy's ideas of our fair cousins on the other side of the Atlantic were based upon types with which Mesdames Florence and Barney Williams have enriched the drama. True, he did not expect that a lady whom his mother would invite on a visit would slap him on the back with a "*Hell-lo, young feller!*" or drum upon the table with the haft of her knife, and demand pumpkin pie. This his common sense held ever as a caricature, but he was not unprepared for one who would call him "Sir," would talk through her nose, and possibly misuse her knife at luncheon. When he saw a lady dressed with exquisite taste, and moving like a fawn, walking up to the door on the arm of a man who might have been a duke or a clerk in the Treasury, he thought it must be some one else, but it was not. Mr. and Miss D'Esmonde were introduced, and neither of them talked through the nose.

They were taken over the grounds, shown the studies, and entertained at luncheon which they discussed with good appetite, and the utmost propriety. Surprise, disarmed, Percy's next emotion was, to find that *he*—acting host as he was—was being put at his ease! They came from a race, the most hospitable in the world, and took welcome as they were accustomed to give it—as a matter of course. No hesitation, no "oh, pray don't

take the trouble," and that sort of nonsense about them. The word "trouble," in relation to a guest, was never heard in their plantation home. The lady was, perhaps, too pale and fragile for our taste, and there was not one strictly beautiful feature in her face; but the faintest touch of interest or excitement lit it up with a smile which would have dowered a dozen plainer maidens with beauty. A smile which glorified it as the sun does the crest of a wave at sea. "She is either the most arrant flirt that ever angled for the heart of man," thought Percy, as she wished him "good-night," "or else the most charmingly natural girl I ever saw." Bessy Raynor, the good reader knows, was not quite natural, but he meant no treason to her. Girls can be charming without being natural.

Blessed be art for its own sake; for its softening influences, for its inspiring action, for the slaps which it deals the almighty dollar in his vulgar gilded face. And especially let it be blessed for its loyalty to tobacco in the dark ages when *Nicotina* the queen; enemy of care, soother of pain, soft nurse of thought—was, by foolish men and women, banished. In the villa by the Thames, she had a worthy shrine—oak wainscotted, dim luxurious; with low divans, a yard wide, of Bismarck brown morocco, skirting the walls, save where hung heavy curtains, emerald green, and the winter fire blazed. Hither Percy and Mr. D'Esmonde adjourned when the ladies said good-night, and here they became acquainted. Evoe! *Nicotina*! When your mutual friend says, "Mr. Brown, Mr. Smith; Mr. Smith, Mr. Brown;" you are introduced. When *Nicotina* in her crown of fire and cloudy robes of blue, graciously wills it so—you know one another.

"So you are a Southerner," observed Percy, as the talk turned upon America, "were you in the war?"

"I was too young," the other replied with a sigh. "I lost my father and elder brother in it. He was only fifteen—poor Tom!"

"What! did boys of that age go out?"

"You couldn't keep them in. We had

no bounty jumpers or substitutes in Dixie. We fought it out for ourselves, and by ourselves. Why if an able bodied man had shown himself idle in the streets of New Orleans, the very children would have hissed him! Up north they could buy brigades of Germans and Irish, and crushed us by sheer force of numbers."

"And now that it is all over—candidly; do you think you were right?"

"We went with our State."

"Aye, but was that justified?"

"Rather a large question, and one which has not yet been tried, except by fire and steel. They called us 'rebels,' the war a 'rebellion.' They imprisoned our President as a traitor; they deprived thousands of their civil rights as traitors—but, please, mark this! they never even attempted to convict one man of treason."

"It is well to build a golden bridge for a retiring foe," said Percy, who was strong in proverbial philosophy.

"A golden bridge! That of Al-Syrat was easy to travel in comparison with the one they made for us," said the other bitterly.

"With no Mahommed to give you a lift over it? Well, one great good came out of it.

"What is that?"

"The extinction of slavery."

"It substituted one race for another—that's all! The white man is the slave now. His former servant is his master. He does not exactly put him to labor, but he picks his pocket of the value of his toil, loads his property with taxes amounting to confiscation; and with corrupt judges and arbitrary governors, subjects him to a tyranny which you English have not known for centuries. And the negro is no better off than before, as a race. A few hundred possibly, good cooks and barbers, have become execrable officials, and the rest are starving."

"Look here, Mr. D'Esmonde!" Percy asked, "which would you rather do—live free on a crust a day, or be a slave?"

"Put like an Englishman, but the *argumentum ad hominem* is not fair. The blood of I don't know how many generations of freemen runs in my veins. The men my father held as slaves before the

war, and their great great grandfathers before them, never knew what freedom meant. They do not know what it means now. Ask me if *they* would rather live upon a crust free, or be as they were; and I will answer without hesitation that six out of ten—if they dared to speak the truth—would tell you 'no' to-day, and eight out of ten the same five years hence."

"Then they don't deserve freedom?"

"How could they possibly deserve it? They did nothing. I for one would not have denied them freedom as the result of a scheme in which they should work it out gradually, and learn to make good use of it when got. To understand the south you must get rid of those 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' ideas, in which your Exeter Hall folks rejoice. Suppose I were to write a story of conjugal life in England based upon the 'Police Reports.' Let me tell you two stories, out of thousands that could be told, to illustrate the real condition, past and present, of the negro in the south. An old nigger once came to our house, in New Orleans, to ask for something to eat, and got it. Then he came twice a week, and at last every day for his meals, and got them. Next he asked leave to sleep in the tool house, and got it. Next for a bed and that was given. Dimes for tobacco, and car rides followed—then came the end. We left, and his parting words to my sister were 'Aye! missie, me is an unfortunate old nigger, t'ain't like de old times. *I done got nobody as belongs to me.*' Mark—not I don't belong to anybody; but no one belongs to *me*. There were exceptions, of course; but that was the dominant feeling. The master, his children, his house, his wealth, belonged to his negroes. Amongst themselves they took their status from him. The free laborer they called 'poor white trash.' Now for my other parable. One day, just before the election of 1860, whilst in company with an ex-governor of the State, I met a 'colored gentleman' dressed all in black with a diamond pin and a gold-headed cane, whom I recognized as my father's barber. He was charmed to meet us—quite affable, and asked my friend

how he was going to vote. He told him he had no vote, being one of the proscribed. 'Well, what a pity—and I'm a senator!' said the darkie. 'Look at dat! Now I'll tell you what you got to do Mas'r Herbert. You got to get a bill of 'demnity, like de rest ob em. You draw him up, and I'll fix him froo the senate. Only don't you write him *too* good, else dey nebber will tink I done him myself.' These be our rulers now."

"Oh, but that must surely be an extreme case!" expostulated Percy.

"I assure you that it is not. We have legislators in Louisiana who cannot read or write. We had a chairman of a finance committee who was obliged to engage a clerk to add up the figures presented to him, and was not ashamed to ask for a vote to pay his assistant for the service. As we were crushed by numbers in the war, we so are crushed by numbers at the polls; and when, by putting together all our force, we gain an election, we are swindled out of the fruits by some conjuring tricks with the ballot boxes. All republics degenerate sooner or later into despotisms, and ours is going that way fast. But you've led me on to say more than I intended. It is a foul bird that soils its own nest."

"But a clean bird who owns that his nest is foul, and tries to clean it."

"Well turned! Like most proverbs, that one suggests its own retort. Yes; one of the best signs in my country is the repeal of the Elija Pogram law—'we must be cracked up'—right or wrong. We are nearly a hundred years old now, and can afford to admit that we have outgrown some of our institutions, and that others are run by incompetent engineers. I love my America—great, free, wholesome, whole-hearted America of the people!—but the fraud-United, force-United, greed-United States of the politicians, I can only mourn over. There I go again! Isn't it getting late?"

CHAPTER VIII.

A FAIR REBEL.

So you and my brother were talking

politics last night in the smoking-room," said Fanny D'Esmonde, on her way down to breakfast. "I hope he has made a good Southerner of you?"

"Would you have me a traitor?" he said.

"There is no room for treachery between a good Englishman and a good Southerner, Mr. Tremayne."

She was standing four steps up the staircase, and he leaning over the broad oaken balustrade. Their heads were not far apart, and he fairly winced under the flash which lit the small pale face as she spoke.

"I wish you could have known us before the war, and seen how thoroughly English we were," she added.

"What war?" he asked, with a twinkle of mischief in his eyes.

"I understand what you mean, and will follow you even so far back as that. Read our history—putting yourself in our place, and marking the provocation we had—remember how patient we were, how we strove for peace; and then judge what a wrench it must have been that tore us apart. And bear in mind that when war was forced upon us, the right hand, and all the brain that waged it, came from the dear old South."

"Well, it was some comfort to be beaten by a Washington," he said.

"We think alike so far; but when the separation came, it was with your king and his government, not with *you*. We loved England—its ways, its thoughts—still. Do you know that there were old folks in Virginia and the Carolinas who chartered ships, and brought out English bricks, for the pleasure of saying that they lived in English homes?"

"I did not indeed," he replied. "On the contrary, I thought you were especially hostile to us because——"

"Well, because?"

"Please let me off! I was sliding into a subject which I should hate to discuss with you."

"I understand. You mean slavery. It is no use discussing that. I smile upon it through rose-colored glasses from one side, and you dip your spectacles in lamp-black

and glare upon the other. No; let us go on about our English proclivities."

"I thought you were of French extraction; your name sounds French."

"Sound and fury signifying—nothing!" she replied. "We are American *au fonde*—that is, down to 1776. We were British for years and years before then. Oh! you've no reason to be ashamed of us. We are of no degenerate or mongrel race. We fought you well, and we beat you well, and we loved you well for all that."

She is leaning over the balustrade now, and Percy finds it pleasant to look at her and hear her voice, instead of leading the way to the breakfast-room, as he ought to do. She is pleasant to see; her lithe, plump little figure, draped in purple cloth, glorified with violet plush, a quaint stand-up lace collar crisping round her neck, and twin sisters of it on guard at her wrists. An elbow is on the balustrade, and her face is half hidden by the hand which supports it. Her voice is soft and low, with a contralto touch in it, which vibrates and seems to say "*hush!*" to every other sound. It is *alive*, this voice, and her bright face softens, and flashes up, and smiles in accompaniment. She is not ashamed of being in earnest. Her "we fought you well, we beat you well, and we loved you well," are all spoken with emotion.

"This is acting," Percy says to himself, with what he would like to make a sneer—but it won't come.

He cannot keep his eyes off hers, and they meet him without a flinch of consciousness. When he speaks he finds that his own voice has softened.

"I am sorry to hear you speak in the past tense," he said. "Don't you love us now?"

"We think you might have helped us—that you ought to have helped us—in our struggle with the Yankees; and so we are sore—we *are*."

Down went her chin, sideways.

"Why, you were a child when the war was over?"

"And there are children in the South to-day, Mr. Tremayne, who think as I do."

"Does it not strike you as being rather the reverse of wise to" ("cry over spilt milk" was on the tip of his tongue, but he checked the familiar aphorism, and substituted)—"to perpetuate hatred."

"It is not only unwise, but wicked. We are not to blame. Our enemy chooses to be ungenerous and brutal, and has to take the consequences."

"Come, come! You always hated the Yankees."

"We always hated Yankee ways—so much the better for us. Do you love Mr. Odger and Dr. Kenealy? Do the Irish love you? We are the Ireland of America. Generations of kind and honest rule would not quench our hate, and the first conciliatory touch has yet to be given."

"It is a bad sign for a nation when fair young lips can speak so bitterly," thought Percy. "Make the women thus, and what will the men be?"

"So," she added, more gaily, "own that you were selfish and wrong, and go into the corner."

"There's an excellent corner in the library, with a fire in it," replied Percy; "will you come?"

"Oh, I have not been naughty!"

"Then I plead not guilty. I will not be punished alone."

"Oh! a *tête-à-tête* with me would be punishment! Thank you, Mr. Tremayne," with a low courtesy.

"I should have said that going into the corner in such company would be no expiation of my fault; but unfortunately I didn't. When people fence with words, I think they should do as well-bred fencers with foils—acknowledge the thrust they have not parried. So, mademoiselle, *touché*," with a low bow.

"Are you two practising for a minuet?" asked Mrs. Tremayne, as she joined them.

"No," said Fanny. "We were not partners, but opponents. I smote your son with a curtsey, and he crushed me with a bow."

"Oh, if people will pelt pearls and diamonds, I, for one, must retire in disorder. I have no such ammunition," said he.

We must really get up a convention *à la Russe* to settle what weapons may be

used in these conflicts," observed Mrs. Tremayne. "As it is, young men and old women have no chance, and in the meantime suppose we go and breakfast."

It soon became abundantly clear that Fanny D'Esmonde was a spoiled child, and that it was capital fun to spoil her. She was a novelty, and a charming one. She never "gushed," and nothing bored her. She was as bright as a bee, and of a laziness which was as graceful as it was profound. When callers were introduced, Percy remarked the same cordial lighting up of her face, the same inviting openness which he had been conceited enough to think was all for him, when they first met.

"She has the dearest little ways," his mother remarked to him, as she ran up to dress for a drive, "and I never saw any one so quick at thawing people. Lady Hucklebury even was civil to her, and made me promise to take her over to Kingston on Friday."

"She is quite nice," Percy says as from the blush.

As a man in love, and half engaged to be married (he has his own consent, you know) he may play Sir Oracle on such a point. He likes to "draw" Fanny, and hear her talk treason. He gets some new ideas from her, and gathers her history, piecemeal, as follows:

She came of a race whose position is not easy to realize by the light of our own social history; from a race of men who grew cotton and made sugar and were traders, but who ruled the vast estates which produced their riches as never did titled earl in our most despotic times; and they brought into their homes all that was most refining in modern civilization. They ruled their lands not by the brute force of men at arms, but the influence which makes a happy household think that whatever its head may do is right, simply because he does it. There was no higher rank into which they might struggle, therefore they were at their ease with all men. There was no lower orders seeking to invade them, therefore they were courteous and open to all. They had all the comfort, the calmness, and the grace of an assured past, present, and—as they sup-

posed—future. Their Republicanism sat lightly upon them. In their hearts they were Monarchists to a man, as they saw Royalty—English-speaking and English-meaning Royalty—become year by year more pure, and their own institutions becoming year by year more corrupt. They were no worse Americans for that. Their sons and daughters married for love when they loved. There was room enough and to spare in their great houses for a troop of grandchildren, and there was a warm place in the old folks' hearts for the new son or daughter. The traditional mother-in-law was not known in Dixie, and there were children—not young gentlemen who "didn't care" at thirteen, or young ladies who tossed their willful heads at twelve, but free, happy children, who knew not a nursery gate, picked up the manners of the drawing-room, and were at their ease with all comers, at an age when our progeny are male and female cubs. There was not any danger for them, so they knew no fear. A maiden, however pretty, be her raiment ever so poor or so costly, might walk the streets of New Orleans—did she so desire—from dewy morn till eve, and not an offensive word or look would molest her. A short parley and a quick shot would have followed such an offence. Gay Lotharios carried their lives in their hands. When men quarrelled, there was mischief. No firing in the air; no scratch upon a sword arm, and then breakfast for four, amidst effusions of mutual glorification. Pistols at ten paces; shot guns, loaded with ounce ball, at forty yards; small swords, to be used as long as they could be grasped, was the order of the day when a real injury was done. Barbarous! Oh, of course, dreadfully barbarous! We know better. A state of society in which a gentleman may give another the lie in a club smoking-room, or (being six feet high, and an athlete) may tell stories of his sister, or run away with his wife, and make fun of him (by counsel) in the Divorce Court afterwards, is so very pure, and *barbarous* cannot, in the oldest sense of the word, be applied to it. But it kept the crescent city peaceful and virtuous—as the cities of men may be—not

because its citizens feared shot and steel, but for hatred of the cowardice and the cruelty for which shot and steel were prescribed.

In such a state of society was Fanny D'Esmonde "raised." In her plantation home she was a princess sole—in the neighboring city a princess amongst princesses. Not a whim unsatisfied; not a pleasure that her innocent young heart could imagine, denied. Spoiled! Oh, yes, all that, from her slipper tips to the topmost curl of her chignon; but, taking it as a right, and giving back love and freshness and practical gratitude five hundred per cent.

Then came the war. New Orleans was taken. Her mother—who had sent a packet of quinine and some simple comforts to a sick son in the Confederacy—was imprisoned during the stifling heat of the summer, in one room, with one window high up, and when she begged for this to be opened, the renegade German brute who was her jailor, had it boarded over! Husband and son were away—as all men were—fighting. Fanny—a child then—was left with her child brother alone in their house. At noon one day an order came from the general commanding that he wanted that house at four o'clock. He found it a palace, he left it a pig-stye! He stole—there is no other word for it—he stole every ounce of plate they possessed, from a salt-spoon to a punch-bowl. He cut the paintings which hung on the walls from their frames, rolled up the "canvas," and packed them up in his trunks. What he did not filch, he broke or soiled. He left nothing behind but some grocers' bills—unpaid. What else he did in that city need not be recorded here. He had the cunning of a low Old Bailey attorney, the military capacity of a drummer boy, the coarseness of a butcher, and the heart of a mouse. In less than eight months he earned an amount of contempt for himself, and laid up a score of hatred against his party, which the honor of a Sidney, the prescience of a Cavour, and the tact of a Palmerston could not wipe out in a lifetime. He took himself, his spoons, and his pre-nomen, "The Beast," back to the

place whence he came, and is now a shining light amongst those who turn up the whites of their eyes, and sigh over the wicked South, and especially over wicked, vindictive, and turbulent (though spoonless) Louisiana.

Mrs. D'Esmonde never recovered the effects of her imprisonment. The colonel, her husband, was killed in action. Her eldest boy died of his wounds. George and Fanny were left orphans, the one at twelve, the other at eight years of age, when peace, reconstruction, and ruin came upon the land. The ruin was not so complete for them as for many others, so far as the loss of worldly possessions went. They have houses and lands left which bring in a comfortable income, and they are now on their travels seeing the world.

Thus Fanny D'Esmonde—historian and sage, compiled from various fragments by Percy Tremayne and unrevised by this present writer, who admits that there is room for revision. The picture she presents accounts for her and her brother, and for some thousands of other men and women, who suffered as they did, and who are brought into immediate contact with the refinement they represent and reproduce; but it leaves a great deal out which may be added hereafter by another hand. A historian in seal skins with a bright little face flushed by the keen winter breeze, and which wants constantly to be cleared of rebellious gold brown hair, as you drive her along over the snow—is a dangerous sort of guide. A sage who moralizes in the twilight with a lace handkerchief at her eyes is apt to find disciples.

Not one thought disloyal to Bessie entered Percy's mind. Fanny was "quite nice," that was all, and Fanny's brother a capital companion. It was arranged that he should visit Percy at Wharnstead, when the latter's holiday was over, and see the last of the pheasants; and then the project grew.

"If you would come, mother, we might all go,"—this with the slightest possible glance in the direction of Miss D'Esmonde. But Mrs. Tremayne absolutely refused. She would never enter that house unless

he were master there. No, they might go, and Fanny should stay with her till her brother came back.

"How very odd!" George D'Esmonde had exclaimed when King's Morton was mentioned. "I have a letter of introduction to a man who lives near there, but which I never expected to present. We met his married daughter and her husband, at home, and they made us promise to call, if we ever went to that part of the country—name of Dennis, do you know him?"

"Yes. I—know him," said Percy, "but between ourselves there are reasons which prevent us from becoming neighborly, as I should like to be. Still, *you* can call."

"Oh, I'm not impatient about it."

"You should call, really," Percy insisted. "The Grange is a curious old place; the sort of representative old place which Americans of your stamp delight in."

"And I'm not to go, broke in Fanny, in mock despair. "Cruel fate! There will be sliding doors, and secret places, and armor, and old banners, and—but, oh, that would be *too* good—I might be able to give up the rest, but that, oh!—now Mr. Tremayne, the solemn truth" (small forefinger in the air), "is there a ghost?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then I am resigned. There being no ghost at Mr. Dennis' Grange, you can go there alone, George. Had there been, wild horses could not have torn me from your side. It is the ambition of every good American to see a real old British ghost. We have nothing but spirit-rapping things—inferior and spurious articles, with none of the proper surroundings."

"We must certainly find you a fine, high-dressed specimen," laughed Percy, "and serve him up with clanking chains; and a story, *more majorem*. When I was at Oxford I used to visit a house that was haunted by a previous Chatelaine, who very injudiciously murdered the butler. Oh, she *did*. There is no doubt about *that* part of the story—she beat his brains out in the cellar, and stained her hands, like Lady Macbeth, in the operation. She was very proud of her pretty hands, and indignant with the butler for spoiling

them with his plebeian blood. My dear mother! I've seen her picture, so it must be true. She stands, life size, over the mantelpiece in the great dining-room, dressed as a shepherdess, with her beautiful hand in the air, so!—sniggering at it."

"Sniggering," observed Mrs. Tremayne, "is vile slang, but I must confess that it is good enough to describe the usual expression on family portraits of the past century. Proceed with your ghost, Percy."

My ghost proceeds by herself every night—out of her own room, along the picture-gallery, down the servants staircase to the cellar; where she murders the butler over again, and comes back sniggering."

"Have you ever seen her?" asked Fanny, fun and wonder struggling for mastery in her pretty eyes.

"Well, I can't say that I ever did, myself; but I once sat up all night watching for her."

"And she couldn't come out! I know, just like them. Ghosts are so tiresome."

"As bad as children and pet dogs," gravely suggested Mrs. Tremayne; "never will show off when you want them."

"Still," said Fanny, "you have plenty of old castles and places in England with ghost *stories*, and I'm not sure whether the story told on the spot with a circumstance—like that picture or some real sword that has killed some one—to help you to realize it; is not better, on the whole, than sitting up for the ghost in the dark, and finding it is not his night after all. Have you a ghost story in your family?"

"I am afraid not."

"Or even a mystery?"

"Mother dear, can we oblige Miss D'Esmonde with a mystery?" Percy asked.

"Nothing more profound than that of a grown man who talks nonsense," his parent replied.

"Oh, Mrs. Tremayne!" Fanny expostulated, "don't you think it does grown people good to talk nonsense sometimes? Please say it does, for there's George frowning at me."

"No one is allowed to frown here," smiled the hostess.

"I beg pardon, and won't offend again," George pleaded. "Now suppose we change the subject."

"Why so?" Percy asked.

"Because——"

"I know," whispered his sister. "We have what he thinks is a mystery in our family."

"A spirit-rapping thing?" Percy asked with malice.

"No sir. How dare you! It belongs to the time before that other war, when we were English, and is highly respectable."

"Stop a moment!" Percy exclaimed, jumping up. "Let me shut the shutters. It isn't quite orthodox to talk mysteries before dinner, but artificial gloom may be provided. Is there a picture or a real sword?"

"No, but something nearly as good. George, dear, have you got it?"

"Of course I have," he replied, breaking his promise, and frowning again; "but surely, Fanny, you——"

"Oh yes she is," cried Percy from the window. It was almost dark, though barely five o'clock. "She's going to tell us all about it."

"I—I think I'd better not," pleaded Fanny, whose gaiety had fallen considerably since her brother spoke. "It wouldn't interest you."

"Let us judge of that, dear," said her hostess.

"And after all, it was a dream, or—or—something; not a ghost."

"It *was* a ghost," Percy asseverated, "it was a real li—well it was a real dead man's—was it a man's?—ghost; and we will not be done out of him on false pretences."

"Please don't," she cried, as though he had struck her. "It was so foolish of me to mention it when we were joking, for we," she said seriously and taking her brother's hand, "have been taught to believe there is something that we cannot comprehend, but must not jest about it."

"If you like to tell us, dear," said Mrs. Tremayne, who, for the first time, began to show interest in the conversation, "we will listen to you with the utmost respect,

but if it be painful, pray don't mind Percy; we will turn him out of the room, and have our tea."

"The whole thing is not worth making a fuss about," George D'Esmonde interposed. "It comes to this. A remote ancestor of ours had a dream, or vision, or visitation—what you please. A beautiful woman appeared to him three times, and on the last occasion bade him follow her, which he did; till he came to a hut where a man lay dying. He had just strength enough to gasp, 'my son—at last!' and to press into his hand this curious old key."

So saying, George D'Esmonde drew forth his watch chain—a double one—to one end of which hung a silver key, the haft shaped like a cross entwined with ivy.

"We have worn it, from father to son, ever since," he added in conclusion, "and it is supposed to bring us luck."

CHAPTER IX.

"BEWARE THE HAND THAT HOLDS THE IRON KEY."

IF a mad bull were introduced into a second-hand book-store, and allowed to disport himself therein, fancy free, for (say) three quarters of an hour, he might—should his dementia take a violent form—produce about as much confusion as Sir Stephen found when Judge Alexander bade him "come in." And if you wanted the portrait of a man capable of taking that bull by the horns and turning him out, the present occupier might serve the artist as a model.

Tall, bony, ragged-faced, with the eye of an ape, and the jaw of a mastiff, he presented a combination of force, fraud, and mockery which might have puzzled a Lavater to make a character out of. His visitor was no Lavater; standing there, in his lavender gloves, and a bunch of violets in his button-hole, he saw only a shabby old man, surrounded by evidences of learning which inspired no respect.

The judge swept a pile of books off a broken chair, and bade him "sit down there." Then he filled a huge briar-root

pipe with the strongest perique tobacco, and fired it with a match, which he lit on the flank of his rusty black trousers, sat himself in his own seat by his own untidy table, and took stock of his visitor out of the corners of his furtive eyes.

His visitor, after a "hem!" or two, began pompously—

"I have called upon you, sir——"

"Granted; go on."

"In my letter of the eighteenth, I took the liberty of stating that——"

"I have your letter; it speaks for itself. You've come to suck my brains—suck away, young man!"

This disconcerted Sir Stephen. How dared this disreputable old man to snap him—Sir Stephen Willford, baronet—up like that? He would have resented the affront, but for something between a frown and a gibe on the disreputable person's face, which cowed him.

"Well, let me help you to put up the pump," said the other. "You are a Willford, and the head of the family. I'm a Willford, too—did you know that?—and I'm not proud of it."

"That is a matter of taste," replied the baronet, with his best sneer. "We are a good old family."

"Old, if you like."

"Many peers cannot show a pedigree so good and old as ours."

"So old; leave good out. You claim from a name-sake of yours, who lived in the days of James the First of England. Do you know what he was?"

"I do. I happen to have studied the subject, Judge Alexander. Our ancestor, Stephen Willford, was a man of note."

"He was a witch-finder!" snarled the judge.

"I beg your pardon!" the other retorted, hotly. "You know nothing about it. He was a trusted officer of the Bishop of Chester, and afterwards of the king himself."

"He was a witch-finder!" roared Alexander, and a rogue at that! He scared people out of the country by accusations of witchcraft, and then stole their lands. Every one, by God! which your *good* old family have held, is stolen!"

"We have deeds of grant to show for it, anyhow," Sir Stephen muttered, much subdued by the late outburst.

"Deeds of grant be d——d! You stole them, gave up half to some rogue at court, and got a deed of grant for the rest. A pickpocket who rubs out the number of a stolen watch, and has a fine presentation forged in the case, has as clear a title as old Stephen Willford had. Mind that, and don't talk to me about your good family. I know you. You're all alike. You've come here now to see if I'll help you to rob a better man than you are."

"You really put things in a most insulting manner, sir," said the baronet, warmly—"a manner to which I am not accustomed;" and he rose.

"Oh! you'll get accustomed to me in time—you've got to. It's my way. I don't mean any harm. Sit down, and we'll go on with the pump, and leave the family alone, now that you see I'm not frightened at your title and your pedigree. Now then. Your father found a deed of grant by King James to Stephen Willford of some property now held by a Mr. Denys."

"Dennis is his name."

"A corruption. It was spelt with one "n" and a "y" when old Stephen died. Don't you interrupt me, young man, till the pump is up. Dennis, as you call him, would show no title when your father sued him, but relied upon *squatter's right*, which could only be upset by proving fraud in the original occupation, or some acknowledgment, by payment of rent or otherwise, of a superior landlord. Dennis's lawyers knocked yours into a cocked hat; but the old man didn't give in. He set to work to find that fraud or acknowledgment. He hated Dennis pretty badly it seems, and weighed him in his own scales. So the whole history of your good old family was raked up and turned over. He discovered that Stephen Willford's son came over to this country, and died here; and next he discovered me."

"It was arranged at one time that I should come out and confer with you on the subject," said Sir Stephen, taking advantage of the pause.

"Mighty lot of good *you'd* have done!" Alexander snarled.

"My father's letters remained unanswered. We did not know that they had reached you."

"They reached all right; but look here, young man," said Alexander, shading his shaggy brows with a grimy hand, and looking his visitor for the first time straight in the face, "there was no business in them. They were full of poppy-cock. Do you know what poppy-cock is? It's fixed up of twaddle and beating about the bush, and 'if,' and 'perhaps so'—that's poppy-cock! There's pious poppy-cock, and that's meaner still. Old Sir William used a lot of that too. He wanted to suck my brains through the mail, and he never once wrote *how much*. That's why I didn't answer his prosy old letters. I was waiting for business. Now he's dead, and you are Sir Stephen. You know as much as he did, and more, now that you've got the history of your name-sake. The rest is here," striking his forehead almost fiercely. "The pump is up, Sir Stephen Willford. The handle is yours. Go on."

"I will begin where my father left off," said the baronet, in a husky voice. "*How much?*"

"You're smarter than I took you for, by God!" shouted the judge, starting from his seat. "That's business. Half."

"Half what?"

"Half all I get you."

"You know, then — you — you have some clue — you can——" stammered Sir Stephen.

"Poppy-cock! poppy-cock!" Alexander cried, waving his long arms about his head, as though driving away some swarm of things that stung him. "I know what I know; I have what I have; I can do what I can do—and the half of all is yours if you have the sense to come to business, and drop your d——d chattering."

"Excuse me, I do not associate business with vulgarity and abuse. You said not long ago that I wanted to rob Mr. Dennis."

"Pshaw! Don't let us quarrel about a word. Let it pass."

The speaker had thrown away his pipe, and was pacing up and down the room,

kicking books, papers, and litter out of his way, till he had made himself a path.

"I have no desire," Sir Stephen continued, "to deprive Mr. Dennis of anything that is properly his, and it appears to me rather exorbitant to be charged fifty per cent. for the restitution of what is my own."

"You fool! Is not fifty per cent. fifty times better than nothing? Do you suppose that *I* would puddle and potter for a six and eightpence here, and a five guineas there, like the dolts who fooled your father into court before he had a leg to stand on? If I said 'Give me ten thousand pounds down, and take your chance of what I may get,' would you trust me?"

Now the legal gladiators who fought for Sir William in "the Rolls" were men of distinction in their profession, and absolutely refulgent with respectability as to their private lives. Mr. Lachrimer, the attorney, conducted a business which was over a century old, and had frequently been taken for a bishop. Dumbledor, Q.C., was a gentleman and a scholar. His junior, Mr. Burner, could do anything but take a joke, and was a rising man. Stephen remembered them all, remembered how they smiled upon him (all but Burner), and crushed him with their benevolence and wisdom. And now, here was a half naked semi-savage raving up and down his dirty room, and not only treating him as the dirt under his feet, but forcing upon his hearer the conviction—if it were only momentary — that he was their superior! Excitement made him hideous, but irresistible. He looked like a wolf that was changing into a man, or a man who was subsiding into a wolf, as he raved on.

"No, you would not trust me," he replied to his own question. "You're a Willford! Do you think you're to wake up the fighting devil who has slept here (again striking his forehead a blow which would have staggered most men) for twenty years, and get off with a lawyer's bill of costs? No, sir! Exorbitant! Fifty per cent. exorbitant, when your high and mighty English lawyers have failed? By God! if your father had come to terms, I'd

have made him pay two-thirds for wiping out the old grudge. It's dead now, and I'm more moderate with you."

Dead? The old grudge dead? Not so. The error rather weakened the fascination which this strange being had begun to exercise over his hearer; but it touched a spring which raised the curtain from before a picture pleasant for Sir Stephen to imagine—John Dennis, who had expatriated him, turned out of his own home!—Haughty Captain Jack, with his "d——d supercilious ways," driven to get his own living as a billiard-marker. There was revenge and more—rehabilitation in the thought. His persecutor, as Mr. Dennis of the Grange, was a power in the country—as a ruined man, who would mind him? Half of what might be won from Dennis was no loss to Willford, and there *was* a grudge to settle. It pleased Sir Stephen's small mind that in the matter of that grudge he was going to get the better of the man whose influence was overwhelming him.

"I certainly think that payment of your services by a per-centage would be the most satisfactory plan," he said, "and I shall not grudge it, however easily it may be gained. I am a man of the world, my dear judge, though you, in your peculiar way, appear to doubt it. Everything is worth what it will fetch, and you have a right to sell your wares at your own price."

"Bah! I've nothing to sell. Do you think we are acting a play, and I'm going to open some box, and take out somebody's will, or a rusty dagger, or some such trash, and so give the rightful heir his own? Nonsense! I've nothing to sell, only to *lend*. Take the use of my brains for half what they may earn us, or let us have an end of this for ever."

"I accept," said the baronet, holding out his hand. "Half-and-half—share and share alike, and I will sign any paper you like to draw up."

"Hum! You were educated for the Bar?"

"I was."

"Did you learn anything?"

"Well, I flatter myself I did."

"Did you learn that such a compact as

we are making is illegal, and any instrument containing it mere waste paper?" the judge demanded, with lowering brows.

"What I meant was a memorandum for use between ourselves."

"Which neither could enforce?"

"Which neither could enforce, but it would be binding in honor."

"I intend to be stronger than that. I'm going to do my best for you, because I'm also working for myself. I won't sell you. If you try to sell me, I'll kill you! Oh, I'd kill you as I would a wasp, so take notice."

No noise, no passion now, only a subdued hyena laugh running under the words.

The egotism, self-conceit, and self-confidence of this strangely constituted man, had their effect upon Sir Stephen, because (paradoxical as it may appear) there was nothing to support them. Sir Stephen was one of those shallow people who seek, and often gain, the reputation of being "very superior men," by sneering at men and things upon which society has set her hall mark. He would sneer at the theology of a bishop, the statesmanship of a prime minister, or the art of a Royal Academician, because he had discovered that one who goes into the world's temples, and abuses its idols, is much better thought of than he who stays to worship them. And it is so easy to sneer. Had this professor found Judge Alexander a snug, well-conditioned person in a white tie, and gold-rimmed spectacles, occupying a well-furnished "office," with a bust of George Washington over the book-case, and had heard from such a guide, philosopher, and friend, one-twentieth part of the pretensions put forward by this disreputable, unclean bully, he would have laughed them to scorn. Had such pretensions been less arrogant, he would not have admitted them. There was no middle course to take. It was a case of everything or nothing. The man was either mad or a genius. If mad, there was nothing to lose; if a genius, everything to gain. When released from the pressure of the influence which had subdued him, the master of Wharnstead could not explain

to himself why he had been subdued. He only felt that he had been carried away by a superior force. How was it then that those lightly uttered words, "Oh, I'd kill you as I would a wasp!" thrilled him through and through, and made him shiver?

"I'll have no papers, not a scrap of writing between us," Alexander went on.

"I exact the fullest confidence on your part, and I forbid you to meddle with anything I please to do, and I'll have no going back, mark that."

"It seems to me you are to have it all your own way," Sir Stephen observed, with what was intended to be a laugh.

The remark was put aside with a contemptuous gesture, and had no other reply.

"I will give you twenty-four hours for consideration. Use the time well. I will not have you pretend, even to yourself, that I snapped you up, that you were over persuaded, or any nonsense of that sort. Come here this time to-morrow, and say 'go on,' and you will be no more able to stop me than you could a hundred-pounder shot at the mouth of a gun you had fired; and always remember this—you came to me, not I to you. You have roused me out of the life of a caterpillar in a cabbage and I'm not to be roused for nothing. If you come here to-morrow and say 'go on,' I shall sell up all I have and go to Europe."

"To Europe!"

"Go where I please—that stops foolish interruption. I burn my ships—that's all you have to understand. The means I shall take with me will last for perhaps a year; so you must act sharply, quickly, as I bid you."

"It is only fair you should know that we have exhausted inquiries in England: that we have gone thoroughly to the bottom of our case on the spot," said Stephen.

"You have twaddled about with your hearts upon your sleeves," roared Alexander. "You have scratched the surface like a set of miserable barn-door fowls. Don't talk to me of your 'inquiries!' There's an untouched mine waiting for an eye like mine to discover, a hand like mine to work."

"You exact perfect confidence, and yet get angry when I tell you the facts."

"That for your facts! I know what is passing in your thoughts, young man; you are ashamed of me"—with a glance at his ragged vest—"you think I am not respectable enough to appear in your company. Wait. In two hours—but I make no promises," he broke off. "You shall see what you shall see, in my time, and at my pleasure. Now go."

Sir Stephen Willford, Baronet, was glad to go. He gave a gasp of relief as he reached the street. One sense had become accustomed to the atmosphere of smoke and garlic which prevailed within. It was not for fresh air that he gasped. A sense of moral oppression—mental servitude—was upon him, deepening, strengthening, in the presence of the man he had sought to use as a tool.

Twenty-four hours' reflection free from this influence did not affect its result; but gave birth to many suspicious reasons for adopting it, and to pleasant falsities by which acquiescence was softened down.

He had stumbled against one of the genii, not fallen into the bondage of an Old Man of the Sea. His fortune was to be augmented as Aladdin's palace was built—out of his sight and without any trouble to himself.

If all went right, he could pay the genii his price, dismiss him, and take all the credit for his work. If the genii failed, so much the worse for him. The sting to his self conceit caused by the genii's scorn of his assistance was soothed by this reflection. He almost persuaded himself that spite towards John Dennis was not the mainspring of his action. Was a man forbidden to seek his own from another because they had quarrelled? Who raised the question about the title to that land? His respected father! Who commenced the litigation? His respected father! Whose wish was it that he should educate himself to work the problem out? His respected father's! Sir Stephen Willford became a model for dutiful sons as he thought of the extra thousands he might gain, and the score of hate he might wipe

off, by following the steps of his respected father.

At the expiration of the twenty-four hours he called again on the recluse of Goodchildren Street, and, remembering the effect of a laconic "how much?" in a previous stage of their transactions, thought to repeat it by a jaunty "go on," when the door was opened.

Fiasco! The gaunt figure said not a word, but turned on its heel, walked slowly to its seat (upon which it fell heavily), and buried its face in its grimy hands. After a while he looked up and said:

"I have read that the half-drowned feel so much pain in coming back to life, that they would escape, if they could, from the hands which are resuscitating them."

"I never was half-drowned," Stephen replied, trying to be jocular.

"And I believe that the same feeling affects the half-hanged," growled Alexander. "But never fear, they don't *half* hang now."

"You are not in your usual good spirits to-day, sir."

"No. You have upset me with your 'go on.' Look here, young man. Suppose you had worked for the best part of your life in some room, and stored there tools which you had invented—machinery, the product of your brain, and which had become more and more perfect under your hand; and that the time came when you turned from it all in disgust, and locked the doors, and left the place and its contents to the rust, and the dust, and the rats? Do you follow me? And suppose that, years afterwards, chance, whim, force—anything you like—sent you back to the scene of your old labor, and to its implements so long disused. Would you not pause before that closed door? Would no sort of fear come over you that in forcing it open the whole fabric might come crashing down in ruins upon your head? That even if you did enter in safety, you would see nothing as you had left it? That you would find yourself in a tomb, where what were once living powers lay dead and rotting, with loathsome creatures crawling over them? No; you cannot

follow me!" he cried, starting up, and waving his gaunt arms, as though to exorcise the vision. "How could you? Let us change the subject. Say, have you any tastes at all?"

"I hope so."

Sir Stephen flattered himself that he was a man of very fine and accurate tastes, and wondered what kind of taste this unsavory hermit, who lived in such a den, could have to speak about.

"Ah! I see," the thought struck him, as he looked round, "he wants to sell his books."

Judge Alexander did not want to sell his books, but had something else to dispose of.

"I told you I should have to raise money, as I scorn to ask for a cent in advance," he said. "Here" (opening an old armoire) "is what is left of what once was a fine collection of *bric-a-brac*. As it is, it would do credit to any cabinet; but such things are not cared for here. Some are valuable for their age and rarity; that cup, for example, is the old Chelsea ware, of a mark much valued by collectors; those bronzes are from Pompeii. If I had time and money enough to make people think that I did not want to sell this, or that, or those, I could get a thousand dollars for them piecemeal. Give me five hundred down for the lot, and they are yours; or, I'll tell you what," he added, as he brushed the dust off his hands—"lend me a hundred pounds on them, and take them to London, for sale there."

"I will have them at your own price," Sir Stephen replied. "We have a cabinet of *curios* at Wharnstead."

"You've made a bargain," grunted Alexander. "That in your hand now is a perfect gem—a veritable Cellini, I believe. Deserves to repose on a cushion of crimson velvet, under a crystal shade, to defend its intricate tracery from the dust. Look at this sea-weed around the anchor—so delicate, so natural!"

"I wonder where is the lock it was made for?" mused the head of the house of Willford.

So you perceive that they were talking about a key.

CHAPTER X.

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

LET me see you in my room, Percy, before you go to bed," said Mrs. Tremayne to her son, as he and George D'Esmonde were starting off towards the smoking-room, on the night of the day on which Fanny's ghost story had been so cruelly cut short.

"Don't you think we'd better not keep Mrs. Tremayne up," observed George, when they were alone in the hall. "I am afraid she is not quite well."

"What makes you think so?" asked Percy, with anxiety.

"Well, I thought she was unusually silent at dinner, and seemed rather restless all the evening."

"Oh, is that all! That's nothing. It's only a thought. Dear mother! She, too, mixes her colors with brains, and has 'torts,' as Handel had, which make her fidgety till she has got them safe down on canvas. Do you remember her picture of Portia and the Prince of Morocco? No; I forgot, you weren't here when it was exhibited. She did not choose the subject—not a good or a popular one, for the scene is not in the play as it's acted. A rich Manchester man—great fellow for modern pictures—ordered it on commission. Well, as a thing of color and detail, it was just in the dear old mater's style, but of course the success of it (or the failure) would be in Portia's face. She painted it full of fear, and that didn't please her. She made it anxious, and that wouldn't do. She hid it in her hands, and that pleased her at first, for the hands were beautiful, and there was a quiver of indecision in one of the fingers which told you that, woman like, she wanted to peep at what she feared to see. She well might have left it so, but some one said it was a trick to hide incapacity, so she got angry, and painted it out. I remember the time well. It was when I came home for my first 'long,' and she used to be silent and fidget about as she did this evening—thinking. She never takes pencil in hand till she has the idea trapped in her head. We didn't live here then. We were poor

folks before *Portia*—had a cottage in Kent, near Southborough, and the mater used to go and sit in Southborough Wood to think, to wait for Portia's face to come. One day a little commonplace girl passed along the path with a bird's nest, which it seemed she had found and taken all by her own self. She carried it like a treasure; but woe for her! In the offing appeared three big boys, three pirate craft bearing down upon this poor little sail, and intending (as she supposed) to rob her of her nest. The mater saw her hide it in the hedge, and sit down near the spot, pretending to make a daisy chain.

"The boys came up, and one of them jumped into the ditch, and thrust his hand just over where the child's treasure was hidden, but after something else—something he did not catch, or did not want, which matters not. Mater watched the girl's face, and saw in it—not fear or anxiety, but an expression as if she *flinched from a blow*. Portia was finished before sunset! The moment chosen was when the prince lays his hands upon the leaden casket, and is in the act of passing on; Portia flinches as if from a blow, is starting back, and yet there is a subtle touch of relief, which shows that the danger has passed. Oh, I do so wish you could see the picture. I cannot describe it; but you understand now what I mean by my mother 'having a thought.' You, or I, or your sister, may have taken some position or given some look which we shall find on the line at the Royal Academy next May." They had reached the smoking-room by this time.

"And find ourselves the humble lump of quartz which has disclosed the existence of a gold mine," said D'Esmonde, lighting up.

"You certainly have a very neat way of putting things, George," was the pleased reply. They had become so intimate, that it was "Percy" and "George" now. "But please don't talk of your sister and lumps of quartz. Call it a diamond mine, and she the sample gem."

"My dear fellow, Americans cannot afford to talk about diamond mines just now," laughed George.

"Ah! you're thinking of that ant-hill made of rubies."

"Don't mention it. I tell you that when these frauds come up, I am ashamed of calling myself an American."

"Oh, they don't affect you."

"Yes, they do. You—I mean you English—always generalize, and generalize unfairly. Because you are made to smart every now and then by a few rascally Yankees, you think that all Americans are rogues. Because we speak the same language, and call things by the same names, you think that the meaning is the same. It isn't. J-u-d-g-e in England spells a man of learning, probity, and culture, who administers justice. It spells the like for us in a few instances; but according to rule it means a party hack, who gains the bench by party tricks, and spreads his robes to cover party frauds. So you argue: Good Lord! what a people! Why, they cannot find an honest man to be a judge!"

"You admit that you *don't* find him. Does it not come to about the same thing in the end?"

"Not for the present argument. Again, you hear that we have no social distinctions, that clerks, and what you call shop-boys, form our golden youth, and you smile a sickly smile when we speak of 'good society.' People are what you make them. You—the dominant race here—have agreed that clerks and shop-boys are cads, and, accordingly, cads they are made. You despise them, and, by the inevitable law of Nature, they become more or less despicable. We—the dominant race over the water—agree to respect all men, and take them as we find them. When a shop-boy behaves like a gentleman, we treat him as such, respect him, and, by the inevitable law of Nature, he becomes respectable. If trade of itself is to make one a cad, the bigger the trade the greater the cad. There is no sense in your distinctions."

"They don't work badly," said Percy.

"They are utterly delusive and mischievous when you apply them to us or any other foreign nation, as you are so fond of doing. The standard of our judges is no criterion of our national respect for

justice, nor do the social qualities of your clerks and shop-boys form any guide for estimating the presentibility of ours. Now do you see what I mean?"

"Here's to our better acquaintance in soda and b—" said Percy, "and now, if you'll excuse me, I'll run up and see what my mother wants."

* * * * *

He found her sitting, dressed as she had left the drawing-room, by the side of her toilette-table, with a box in which she kept her trinkets open beside her, and so absorbed in thought, that he had to knock loudly several times before she moved and answered him.

"Well, mammie, dear, what is it?" he asked, gaily; "D'Esmonde was afraid you were ill, but I knew better. I told him you were struggling with a *thought*. What is it? Have I given you a new idea for Cincinnatus, or is pretty Fanny to be made beautiful for ever as Titania?"

"Sit down," she replied, not appearing to notice his raillery. "Sit down there and listen, my son."

She never called him "my son" unless there was something serious on hand; so his manner changed in a moment, and he did as she bade him.

When you were asking me the other day to tell you about our family affairs, I told you that I had one, and only one, heir-loom."

"Which you promised to show me."

"And now I keep my word. Here it is." And she gave him the gold key, the haft of which was shaped like a heart entwined with forget-me-nots, and watched him as the blood rose to his face and brow.

"How very extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "What does it mean, mother? Why, this is the very brother of that which George D'Esmonde wears, and is an heir-loom in *his* family!"

"Only that it is gold, and his is silver," replied his mother. "The main design of his is a Cross—of ours a heart. Have you not seen branches of charms typifying *Faith, Hope, and Charity*? The Cross stands for Faith; the Heart for Charity. I noticed Mr. D'Esmonde's key carefully.

Do you remember that I left the room to get my glasses, and took it with me?"

"I do, now that you remind me."

"It was only an excuse. I wanted to compare it with mine. Percy, I have no doubt but that they were both made by the same hand, and that a master hand also, and that they were at least two hundred years old. That is all I can say. I cannot answer your question—*what does it mean?* I am lost in wonder."

"My dear mother, fifty sets of keys in the shape of Hearts and Crosses may have been made."

"But how comes it that in my family (which was Italian for centuries) there is a gold key fashioned like a Heart, which we have been bidden to keep as though it were a holy relic; and that in Mr. D'Esmonde's (of which he is the first member to leave America) there should be a silver key of precisely the same style of workmanship which has been handed down, as he tells us, from father to son, and is supposed to bring them luck?"

"It is a remarkable coincidence," mused Percy.

"Coincidence!" exclaimed his mother; "it is more than that. I feel certain that there was—that there may be now, somewhere—a third key shaped like a Cross in—well, most likely iron or steel, and that the three together unlock some mystery in which we are involved."

"I always thought that I was an enchanted prince," Percy began.

"I forbid you to speak again in that tone," she cried, with flashing eyes, and her hot Italian blood, mantled neck, face, and bosom as she spoke. "This is no subject for jesting."

"Mother dear," he replied, taking her trembling hand and kissing it; "you know I would not offend you for the world, but be just before you are angry. What do I know about this that should make it a serious subject to me? Your family has one curious old key, and D'Esmonde's has another, that is all I know. After what you have said, of course I will never joke about it again, out of respect for you; but really, I think I am old enough, and, according to your own conviction, interested

enough to be allowed to judge the whole subject according to its merits."

"You imagine I am keeping some secret from you?"

"If the subject be serious, you *must* be doing so, for as yet you have told me nothing to make it serious."

"Do you never have presentiments?" she asked, after a long pause.

"I am not superstitious, if that is what you mean," he replied, drily.

"It is your cold English blood. Ah, no! it is your dear father's blood," she added, pressing his head against her bosom, and kissing his brow, "and *his* heart throbbed as warmly as heart could throb. Listen, dear: I am not keeping any secret from you. I will tell you all—everything I know, and that is, know as you know things. When your poor grandfather was sinking for want of what his sickness required; when I was starving—not only hungry, *starving*—I took that key to a dealer in curiosities, and asked its value. It was the only thing we had left to sell. He named a sum which overjoyed me. I flew, rather than ran, back, and asked your grandfather's leave to sell it. I shall never forget the expression which came over him. For the first time in his life he gave me a harsh word. He made me swear I would never part with it except to you; and then to exact a similar oath, that you would never part with it except to your son. I ventured to ask him why. 'Because it is the key to your fortune and his,' he replied. 'It has brought none to you,' I said. 'No,' he said, very sadly, 'but the worst has come now, and the better time is at hand.' That was all he would say and is all I *know*, but I feel as he felt—though without the knowledge he may have had—that the better time is at hand."

"Then the D'Esmondes will share in it?"

"Let them. Why not?"

"Will you tell them what you think?"

"Not yet. I will get Fanny to tell me that story in detail. Her brother only gave us the outline. Get him to talk more about it, and we will decide what is to be done before they leave. Ah, Percy, I do wish——"

"What, mother?"

"No matter. It is all in God's hands. Good-night, my son."

* * * * *

"You will oblige me very much, dear," said George D'Esmonde to his sister the next morning, "if you would not mention that subject—you know what I mean—again. It is not one to joke about."

"Well, I won't—there!" Fanny replied, with frank confession and regret; "I was led—I ran over—I—my own thoughts ran away with me. There, don't look so grave. Of course I'll do as you wish; but, after all, there can be nothing in it."

"I am not so sure of that."

"You dear old goose! Do you suppose that you will some day meet an enchanter who will say, 'Ha! that key! you are the great-great-grandson of the Princess of Persia, who eloped with the King of the Golden Mountain in the year one, and are the rightful Emperor of China.'"

"Not quite that," he replied, smiling; but remember this dear, our poor father was not a trifler. He respected that tradition, and greatly prized its token. His father did so before him, so why should not we?"

Fanny's eyes filled with tears as he spoke.

"I wish you had given me a good scolding, she said, "instead of speaking so kindly."

He drew her to him, and kissed her.

"We have only each other now, darling," he said, with a saddened smile. "We must not scold."

And so it ended.

You will understand after this, that when Mrs. Tremayne and her son returned to the charge, they took nothing by their motion, and became all the more curious.

"They are evidently on their guard," Mrs. Tremayne observed to her son the next evening; "and it is quite clear that there is more in it than that bald story of Mr. D'Esmonde's contains."

"He gave us a mere skeleton."

"Not even that; there's no back-bone in it. Why was that man seeking a lost son? Why should he give him that key? Why—having said nothing as to its value

or interest—should the boy treasure it, and hand it down to his posterity?"

"Your last question is one we cannot answer about ours," mused Percy. "Perhaps he knows no more than we do."

"Percy, I detest subterfuge; and I am determined to find out what all this means. Suppose I were to show Mr. D'Esmonde my key, and frankly ask to exchange confidence?"

"My dear mother! What have you to give in exchange?"

"True," she observed, rather chap-fallen.

"You have nothing to tell him," Percy resumed. "If you get him to begin, how would you look when it came to your turn? If he ask you to commence, where are you?"

"Wisely put, my son. No; that will not do."

"But surely you could gain some information otherwise. Have you quite lost sight of all your Italian relations and friends?"

"Quite. Your poor grandfather was morbidly sensitive on that point. He repelled all attempts at intercourse, refused every offer of assistance. Everything or nothing, was his maxim. He kept me in absolute ignorance of our history."

"Still, famous as he was, there must be many now living who could clear this up."

"His public acts are well known; but these would give us no clue to what the key means. The secret—if there be one—dates far beyond his time."

"Some member of his family might know it," Percy said. "Think, mother, was there no one who visited him in his exile, and had his confidence?"

"As to *confidence*, I cannot say; he was so reserved," Mrs. Tremayne replied, half musing to herself. "But there was, as I now remember, one who was very kind to me, and whose visits he just tolerated. Strange, how things come back!"

"Let them come. Who was this one, mother?"

"A secretary of what was then the Sardinian Legation."

"Good, so far. And his name?"

"Tasti—yes, the Count de Tasti."

"Well, suppose we find the Count de

Tasti. I know a man in the Foreign Office who could unearth him. He may be an ambassador by this time."

"Or dead."

"I prefer his being an ambassador," Percy said, gaily. "Ambassadors don't die. My friend in the F. O. tells me that the junior members of the diplomatic service make this a special grievance."

"Percy, be serious."

"Certainly. May I write and ask?"

"It would do no harm."

So Percy wrote, and obtained this reply:—

"MY DEAR TREMAYNE,

"Not to know Tasti proclaims yourself utterly unknown. Though disgusted (wise creature) with politics, he is Victor Emmanuel's right hand man, and knows more about Italy and the Italians than all the ministers since Cavour. Added to this, he is a right good fellow, and fond of everything British. You may certainly write to him, and I will guarantee a courteous answer.

"Yours sincerely,

"A. T. DOCKETTE."

"That's one step, mother mine," said Percy, triumphantly. "*Viva il Conte de Tasti!* At him, mother, in your best *lingua Toscana!* Take heart. Several sheets of paper, and a new pen, and hey for the mystery of the keys! We'll have our *quid* for Master George's *quo*."

CHAPTER XI.

THE NEW MR. ALEXANDER.

SIR STEPHEN WILLFORD was going down to breakfast on the morning after his purchase of those "curios," when a bell-boy, with a card in his hand, met and informed him that there was "a man hunting him down stairs." The card was "the man's" card, and on it was written JUDGE ALEXANDER.

A vision of grimy shirt-sleeves and ragged slippers flashed over the baronet's fastidious mind, and his first impulse was flight—anywhere, anywhere out of a world haunted by so disreputable a spectre. It

did not strike him that, being unknown to any one there, it did not matter who called upon him; and that in a land of universal suffrage—which once put up for President a candidate whose love for Republican principles was in part evinced by his neglect of soap—dirty shirt-sleeves might be a recommendation rather than otherwise. Nor did he consider that ragged slippers and visiting-cards were incompatible. The bell-boy had called his visitor a "man"—not a "gentleman," or even a "person," but a *man*—and in so doing had followed one of the rules of his tribe, which is to discourage callers, by misnaming them, misdelivering their messages, and otherwise taking revenge upon them for the trouble they give.

But flight was impossible.

"Better have him up here," thought Sir Stephen, "than face him in public below."

So he directed accordingly, and up "the man" was shown.

A tall, gaunt man, dressed in a morning suit of dark grey, well-blackened boots on his feet, gloves on his hands, snowy linen at his throat and wrists—a man he might have greeted in St. James Street at five o'clock p.m. in May, and might have been taken for a cabinet minister! A man (mark this, if you please) who wore new clothes, *which did not look new*. Was this the recluse of Goodchildren street? Where was his stubby beard, his long, dank, uncombed locks, his strident voice? All gone! But the eyes were there, with their dark, pent-house eyebrows, and the wolf looking out; there was no mistaking them.

Sir Stephen stood aghast, fairly astounded by the metamorphosis, and could not even stammer out a good morning.

The other took no notice of his astonishment, farther than to say—

"You did not expect to see me so early, my dear Sir Stephen. I have taken the liberty of inviting myself to breakfast, so that I might be sure to catch you. You young men have so many engagements."

In the breakfast room the judge's domineering ways came out, also in new clothes. In the mildest manner, and the blindest tones, he upset most of the arrangements of the hotel. He discharged the waiter

attached to the table he chose, and appointed another in his stead, in spite of his indignant assertion that, "Shure, he was the man that belonged to it." He took command, and gave his orders as though he was the Amphytryon, and the house was his own.

"You will bring in the dishes I have marked one by one," he directed the attendant of his choice. "You will not order the cook to prepare any one of them until you have placed its predecessor before me. Presume to surround me with half a score of little, greasy, half-cold dabs of this and that, and you will find that I am capable of throwing them through the window—*through*, observe—and I will not pay for the glass. Take this away, immediately. A rational human being does not inundate a fasting stomach with a pint of iced water. Stay; if there be any scum on the hot milk, you can take it back; and you may present my compliments—Judge Alexander's compliments—to the proprietor, and say that I desire a cup—two cups, for my friend is also particular—which will weigh somewhat less than half a pound each. Do you quite understand?"

The waiter, who was a German, and found himself addressed, to his delight, in the tongue of his fatherland, and in the tone which its charming institutions authorize his superiors to use, did understand, and gave little cause for complaint throughout the breakfast.

"Now," said the judge, when he had tossed off a *demi tasse* of Chartereuse, "we will proceed to business; and for that purpose adjourn to your room where we shall be undisturbed."

He led the way upstairs, motioned his entertainer to a seat, and thus began—

"I have changed my plans, slightly. At first I intended to go to England alone, but you will accompany me."

This was a surprise. Accompany him to England! Break the compact with John Dennis, and brave that old scandal! It might be done after he had beaten him at law, but before?—it might ruin every chance. He stammered something about "not convenient just at present," but the

judge merely repeated his words, "You will accompany me," with such decision, that there was nothing for it but to make a clean breast, and tell him about the card case and its consequences.

"A mismanaged affair," he said, when the tale was told, "that furnishes me with a little farther trouble to clear it up. No" (after a pause), "I think it can be turned to some use, now I consider. You will give me the names of the persons engaged, and assist me to find them as soon as we arrive. Now, as we are to work together, I am going to tell you all I know of our great case—our case against Mr. Dennis."

"Take care," Sir Stephen remarked jauntily—he had relieved his mind, and was inclined to be pleasant—"Take care I don't 'go back upon you,' as you say here, when I know as much as you do."

"I am not afraid of that," was the grim reply.

"Quite right. I was only jesting, as you were when you talked of killing me, the other day."

"If you went back on me," said Alexander, still in his new voice, "I would shoot you on Fleet street at noonday, if necessary. I would poison you at breakfast, and dine none the worse afterwards. If you fancy that I have been jesting, or that I shall hereafter jest, on this subject, you are fooled. Get that idea out of your head, young man."

"I suppose I must humor you," Sir Stephen replied, with a smile, but feeling uncomfortable under it. "When a gentleman gives his word, it is supposed he will keep it, and not considered good taste to threaten what will happen if he don't, and you must excuse my saying, Judge, that your manner is just a little dictatorial."

"Sir, my mind is dictatorial. It is the superior mind. Its light throws yours into shadow. That my manner should strike you as dictatorial was inevitable, and is not capable of alteration. Let this pass, and do not interrupt me again. When your father's lawyers advised him that the only way to meet the 'adverse possession' plea put in by John Dennis, was to prove fraud in the original occupation of the

land, or some acknowledgment, by payment of rent, or otherwise, that it was held of a superior landlord, they treated him and his ancestors as common squatters, and never troubled themselves to seek evidence of fraud. The land was given, by Royal grant, to old Stephen Willford. His son, Charles, inherited it, and his grandson did not. Why not? During that son's lifetime one, Gregory Dennis, appears as its owner. How? Suppose we can show that this Gregory Dennis defrauded Charles Willford, and that all the Dennises who followed have kept up the cheat, and so despoiled all the Willfords who followed, of their rights, what becomes of their Statute of Limitations then? Prescription does not run against fraud. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly. But you only *suppose* such a fraud."

"Charles Willford was a fanatic. Not such a one as his father, but a sincere fanatic. Perhaps he was disgusted with the state of society in your England under its Stuarts, perhaps he was a little mad, perhaps—well, I am dealing with facts, and so we'll leave conjectures alone. He came to this country within a year of his father's death, and wandered about, preaching, from place to place. That old key I sold you belonged to him, and one of his fancies was to wear it hung round his neck. He never remained long in one place, but from time to time came back to Baltimore, where he found, and wrote letters. Some of the letters written to him came into my possession years ago, on the death of my mother."

"Did I not understand you to say that you were descended from him?"

"You did. Fanatic and wanderer as he was, he found a woman to marry him, or his money—for he had plenty, and scattered it broadcast—and she bore him two children—one he took away with him in one of his wanderings, and lost; the other she carried to England after his death, or, rather, supposed death, for we never found out exactly when or where he died. The lost son was adopted by a French family of this city, and afterwards identified. I am descended from him. His elder brother

became the first baronet in your family—Sir Austin Willford."

"What did the widow do when she got home—to England, I mean?" asked the present baronet.

"She claimed her dower out of the lands which now form part of the Wharnstead estate, and other property, and established her son's rights to what old Stephen had left, all but the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton holdings."

"The very lands in dispute with John Dennis!" cried Sir Stephen, in a disappointed and injured tone.

"The very lands affected by the fraud," replied Alexander.

The baronet gave a sigh of relief. This was getting interesting.

"The letters written to Charles Willford were all from one person—Gregory Dennis (or *Denys*, as the name was then spelled)—and for the most part contain comments upon what Willford had written. This Gregory was evidently an illiterate man, and did not trust himself to be fluent on paper. He addresses his correspondent as 'honored sir,' writes of things he had done at King's Morton as his 'humble duty,' and makes use of many other phrases (which you shall read in the original, and judge for yourself) that make their relative positions clear. Charles was the master, Gregory his servant. Now give me all your attention. One of these letters concludes with some very remarkable words, important enough in themselves, but which, if supported, as by further inquiry they may be, will place you in possession of the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton properties. Is that plain?"

"It is indeed!" Sir Stephen answered, pale with delight and excitement, "but do you mean to say you have had this evidence in your possession for years?"

"For some twelve years."

"And did not tell my father!"—reproachfully.

"Pshaw! Your father! Have I not told you that he peddled and pumped, and hinted," replied the judge, "and never came to the point! Besides I had money then—had enough to eat and drink and be

lazy. Why should I have troubled myself for him—for nothing? What did it matter to me who held the lands. If it had suited me to turn John Dennis out, I would have gone and done it myself—*myself* young man! The credit, the praise should have been *mine*. Am I a man to be pumped, and made a cat's paw! To have my brains sucked by a prosy letter? He should have come to me as you have done, and perhaps he might have got what you will get."

"He very nearly sent me," said the baronet.

"I would not have treated with a subordinate," the judge replied haughtily.

"Well, you have the principal now, and he places himself unreservedly in your hands. Oh! Judge Alexander, how can I properly express my gratitude for your immense services, or my admiration of your talent?"

Sir Stephen was quite humble in his joy.

Alexander waved his hand, as though to deprecate this flattery, and smiled.

"I wonder if the letters from Charles to this Gregory are in existence," mused Stephen.

"I rather hope they are not," replied the judge.

"They might put a different complexion on our case?"

"They might, but what you call 'our case' is, thus far, only a part of the foundation upon which it will be built. Troops of facts, and suggestions leading to facts, which have escaped your mere plodders at home; will come out under my search."

"When will you show me that letter?"

"Not yet."

"But you will tell me its contents? you remember them I suppose. What was the nature of the fraud? How did this Gregory get possession of the land?"

"That you shall know at the proper time."

"This is playing with me, Mr. Alexander."

"You can give up the game if it does not please you," said the judge with a cynical shrug; "only as long as we play partners—I lead."

"Of course you lead, but this groping in

the dark is very irritating to me. It's wretched play to keep your partner in the dark."

"Well, it will not be for long anyhow," the judge said, laying a hand patronizingly on his shoulders; "so don't be irritated."

"When will you show me those letters?"

"As soon as we are in London."

"Not before?"

"They are packed up."

"Indeed! are you—are we to start soon?"

"This evening at five o'clock."

"You take my breath away," laughed the baronet. "Well, I am ready. What a surprise it will be! Ah, this reminds me of something about which I want your opinion. That cousin of mine who was to have been my father's heir has been managing Wharnstead since—since the fuss, you know—without a regular salary, wants me to make him my agent for five years."

"Then make him."

"But he wants a *thou*-sand a year!" Sir Stephen's pocket was a sensitive organ and he announced its assault upon it with a wince.

"Give it him," said the judge decisively, "and a handsome present to boot. Why man, don't you see that your policy is conciliation and liberality. I dare say this cousin has been making friends of the mammon of unrighteousness after the scriptural plan. Be friends with the popular man. Beat him at his own game; you can screw up the tenants again when your foot-hold is firm. A thousand a year! it is cheap as dirt. Respect for your poor father's intentions; liberality to a man who schemed (of course he schemed) to supplant you! amiable wish to heal up old sores—! there is an immense amount of capital to be made out of it. Is he married?"

"No, but he's going to be."

"Then take the bride elect a pair of the handsomest bracelets you can buy at Tiffany's, and make his pay date back to the old man's death."

"I couldn't do it," cried Sir Stephen aghast; "I haven't got the money."

"Promise it—that will do as well; but

let me buy the bracelets. There must be no stinginess there."

And indeed there was not. Eight hundred dollars went into Mr. Tiffany's bank the day they arrived in New York, as one result of this conversation.

"There's one thing," chuckled the servant, "about this land agency, that we did not think of. When I get the Grange he'll have more than he bargained for to do."

"Meaning your cousin?"

"Of course. I'll make him throw that in."

Alexander looked at him steadily for a moment, and then walked on.

"There is a proverb about counting chickens before they are hatched," he observed, when he had swallowed down his rising contempt.

"That reminds me. I was thinking about your supposed fraud, last night. Doesn't it rather go against us that Charles Willford's widow didn't find it out when she returned and claimed the rest of his property?"

"Not at all. The lands were nearly valueless then. Besides she had quarrelled with her husband before she left—who could get on with a man who wandered about the country like a beggar, and wasted his means like a madman? She did not know what his possessions were. She found out some of them from honest friends of old Stephen. Gregory Dennis was not likely to lend a helping hand. The very fact that he did not, damns *him*. So the fact you mention is a two-edged sword, and cuts both ways. Wait till you see the letter and then you will understand."

CHAPTER XII.

"FRAILTY, THY NAME IS"—.

THE time was now approaching when Percy might expect an answer to his ultimatum, which he supposed had reached his cousin at New York. But he did not begin to expect it; not, at any rate, with that feverish impatience which had marked his waiting for the baronet's first reply to his proposition. Then he was at Wharn-

stead, and found it lonely work living by himself in the great dead house. He had little else to do than watch for the postman; and when that functionary had passed, there was no use for the hours until the time came round when he might be looked for again, plodding slowly—disgracefully slowly, as it appeared to the expectant—along the winter-stricken road.

It was different now. He was at home, with plenty to occupy and cheer him. There was his mother, who spoiled him; George D'Esmonde, who interested him; and Fanny—yes, there was Fanny, who made the house very pleasant—Fanny, with her pretty impulsive ways, her delight in small things, her fresh and quaint remarks, her wondrous faculty of finding out what pleased, and doing it. I say still, that no disloyalty to Bessie Raynor entered his heart; but a subtle, half-formed emotion—something between a hope and a wish—that Bessie would prove in time more like Miss D'Esmonde than he had hitherto found her, did give some feeble taps there. Fanny was so thoroughly a home bird. When visitors came down from London—as they did in flocks on a Saturday afternoon—to the river-side villa, she was not seen to advantage.

Now Bessie, on the contrary, did not shine in her home circle. She seldom graced it with her fair presence till about three o'clock in the afternoon, unless somebody called. She had the reputation of being snappish with her brothers and sister, and not over respectful to her parents, since Mrs. Rose had taken her in hand; and the servants hated her. This the fond lover set down to her superiority. They did not understand the grand, beautiful creature, who was all smiles and sweetness to him—or any other worshipper who knelt at her well-worn altar steps. To him she was perfection, until he had seen Fanny D'Esmonde.

Well, he had not much experience of young ladies. He entertained that lofty idea, common to gentlemen of his age, that he would be able to mould his Bessie into his own ideal—say into a sort of glorified Fanny—and neutralise all the evil teaching of Mrs. Rose by the strength

of his character and the depth of his affection. All his hopes turned upon the contents of that letter—that letter from Sir Stephen Willford which might, as the days passed, be awaiting him at Wharnstead. But still he was in no hurry to return. Perhaps he wished to study Fanny's character thoroughly, in order to be better able to engraft its beauties upon Bessie.

Another reason for lingering was that Count de Tasti might be heard from within a week. The interest in the answer from New York paled in the glory of the news expected from Turin; but the Count made no sign, and as business could no longer be postponed, Percy's holiday came to an end.

* * * * *

He was glad to find no letter from Sir Stephen in the pile of correspondence which had accumulated on his desk at Wharnstead. The scene of his former impatience, and objects associated with its cause, partially revived it. He would have felt guilty if that letter had got the start of him; and his breathing quickened, and his hand quivered, as he searched for it.

"You mustn't mind, old man, if I leave you on your own hook to-morrow," he said to George D'Esmonde, after their first bachelor dinner together. "There's such a lot of things to do. Sunday will give me breathing time, and I'll drive you over to the Grange on Monday, and see about what shooting is left."

"I'm in no hurry about presenting my introduction to Mr. Dennis," George replied. "It looks so like sending in a bill."

"Mr. Dennis is not the sort of man to take it so."

"Well, then, I dare say he'll find me out."

Amongst the "lot of things" which Percy had to do, was to call on the Raynors. The doctor would be thinking badly of him if he did not go and report that he had, as yet, no reply from Sir Stephen. Besides, he would see Bessie.

Mrs. Raynor and Mary were in the drawing-room, and it was past the time at which the lady of his love was usually visible; but no Bessie appeared. Under all the circumstances, he did not like to ask

for her! and he observed, with some surprise, that her name was not mentioned. At other times, Mrs. Raynor had been fond of talking to him about Bessie. So he sat, and waited, and exchanged common-places, and watched the door, like an amorous terrier at a rat-hole.

At last Mrs. Raynor relieved his suspense.

"Percy," she said, laying a hand on his sleeve, "I know what is passing in your mind, for the doctor has told me what you said to him the other day. You are looking for Bessie. She's not here, Percy; she's gone."

"Gone!"

"Yes; back again to Mrs. Rose."

"Why, I thought she was to remain with you till May!" he exclaimed.

"It was so arranged; but—you must know the truth, Percy. She had a tiff with her sister, and was not quite as respectful as she ought to have been to me, when I spoke to her about it; for Mary was right. And then her father came in, and I suppose something had worried him—poor man, he has so much upon his mind—and he spoke sharply, and she lost her temper—quite forgot herself, I am sorry to say—and packed up her boxes, and left us. Oh, Percy! we have lost all control over her, and I don't think she loves any of us any more," sobbed the mother.

The sterner parent was more outspoken.

"I tell you what it is, my boy. The girl would make a capital duchess, or a wife for a Manchester warehouseman, with ten pounds a day for pin money. Give her a carriage to loll in, an opera box, and the family diamonds, and I dare say she'd have the temper of an angel. But she won't do for a poor man, or for a quiet life; so get her out of your head as quickly as you can."

All this was kindly meant, only it did not answer with Percy. His dear, high-spirited Bessie! his poor, ill-used pet! Misunderstood at home, and driven to the side of a fast widow, who made her the talk of London! He would show them how mistaken they had all been, if only that trifling cousin would answer his

letters. He got terribly impatient about it now.

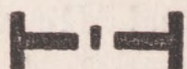
Perhaps he would have been less enthusiastic had the origin of the "tiff" with Mary been stated. If the Raynors had told him the whole truth, he would have learned that no sooner had his back been turned to spend Christmas with his mother, than Miss Bessie plunged into a violent flirtation with the new curate, an able-bodied young Irishman, who had more than his share of the pleasant faculty (bestowed by nature upon his countrymen) of falling in love upon the slightest provocation. In this case, the provocation was not slight. Even meek, retiring Mary was scandalised, and acted as an elder sister should, with the result already recorded.

George D'Esmonde was found out by the family at the Grange, as visitors are often found out in the country. They met at church, and the married daughter (Mrs. Bowring), whom he had known at New Orleans, and was staying on a visit with her father, pounced upon George when the sermon was over, and demanded, with graceful indignation, how he dared to be within a mile of the Grange without calling.

Satisfactory explanations having been made, and introductions performed, the parties joined and walked together to the Grange for luncheon — Percy with Mrs. Bowring, George with her unmarried sister, Grace Dennis, and Paterfamilias in skirmishing order, exchanging greeting with neighbors, front, flank and rear.

This John Dennis is forty-two years of age, but looks younger—a handsome man, with well-cut features and bright active eyes, the sort of man that most of us would rather (to use a slang phrase) dine with than fight.

"The Grange," George D'Esmonde wrote his sister, soon after this visit, "is a charming old place. You will be delighted with it. Place two capital T's foot to foot, thus:



and you have the shape of it. The foot of

the T's in front is the porch—in rear, a conservatory. The heads of the T's in front is old—the rear new. The lodge of the building was originally one long room, but is now divided by oaken screens into three. We never saw such oak—as black as jet, as hard as steel, and carved with the quaintest devices. Some of it was taken from part of a wing which had to be pulled down, and, will you believe it? some Philistine Dennis of the dark ages had it *whitewashed*! But you are to see all this, and more, for yourself. Mrs. Bowring is here, and her children. I enclose a joint letter from her and Miss Dennis, insisting upon your coming here as soon as I am tired of 'bachelor hall,' as they call Percy's domain. I am to go and bring you. Mrs. B., whom we knew as the mildest of the mild, is here a tyrant of the first water, and from her ukase there is no appeal. You will like her sister Grace. Expect me in about a week. Percy is a capital fellow, and does everything to make things pleasant, but his cousin, Sir Stephen Willford, has inflicted upon him another guest, for whom I have acquired a most unchristian aversion, though he is a countryman—not a good specimen. I prefer the Grange, with you" (the last two words were interlined, with a caret). "Give my best regards to Mrs. Tremayne, &c., &c., &c."

It was upon their return to Wharnstead from luncheon at the Grange, that the other guest first appeared to Percy and George D'Esmonde. The fly from the station was just being led round the drive, as they passed the lodge gate, and they beheld in the distance the old butler and the odd boy struggling with an immense trunk at the servant's entrance.

"A gentleman in the study," gasped the former, as Percy hurried up, a living mark of interrogation. "Says he's come to stay, but where am I to put him?"

"Mr. Tremayne, I presume," said the new comer when Percy entered. "Allow me to present my card and this letter."

On the card was printed—

"H. CLAY ALEXANDER,"
and in the letter was written—

"DEAR PERCY,

"This is to introduce my good friend, Mr. H. Clay Alexander, a most distinguished man, and distant relative of our family, in whose history he takes much interest. He is visiting Wharnstead to seek some facts relating to our genealogy, so please hand him over the keys of the strong room, and let him have access to any old deeds and papers he may care to see. I need not add, give him a hearty welcome, because that you are sure to do, for the sake of

"Your sincere friend and cousin,

"STEPHEN WILLFORD."

No date.

"I do bid you heartily welcome, Mr. Alexander," Percy said, when he had read the above; "but really Sir Stephen should have been more considerate, for *your* sake, and given me notice of your visit. He knows perfectly well that his house has been shut up for years, save the few rooms I occupy, and so I am afraid you will have to rough it for a day or two."

"I have lived in a palace, sir," the judge began, "and slept under a tree, with my saddle for a pillow. Nothing is too good for me, or so bad as to be able to put me out of temper. Make no apologies; the fault is mine, I should have written. I intended to write, but I got through my business in London sooner than I expected, and to pass a Sunday in your capital, sir, is a dreadful infliction upon a stranger. Your Sunday trains are bad enough, but slowly as they drag along, they afford you one comfort—they are taking you away from a London Sunday."

Percy gave him up his own room, which in a short time was ready for his use, but did not suit his fancy. The position of the bed had to be altered, and its composition re-arranged. The dressing-table was too large, and he had no use for the chest of drawers. "Let me be brought something upon which I can write, instead," he commanded. A picture which hung facing his pillow as he had placed his couch, would annoy him in the early morning, so that had to go. He was not accustomed to sleep in a room without a carpet (Percy, like a sensible man, *was*),

so a carpet had to be dragged out of some hidden store, and the bright clean oak boards covered with faded wool, plentifully engrained with dust. "It is quite as well," he mused, when he could find nothing more to be altered, "that these people should learn at once that I am to be obeyed."

The meeting with the Dennis family at church was not allowed to put off the proposed visit next day to see about shooting. John Dennis was an autocrat in most things, but did not dare to doom a pheasant without previous consultation with his head keeper. They (Percy and George) were to come over early with their guns, and everything would be arranged for them. What was to be done now? Throw out a delicate hint that the distinguished genealogist might commence his labors as soon as he pleased, and leave the younger men to their own resources? Yes, that might do. The trap was baited, and set, but the quarry declined to enter.

"No; I think I shall accompany you," said Alexander. "I have plenty of time before me. I never cared much for hunting small birds. My sporting days were passed upon the plains of the far West, with deer and buffalos, or on the Rocky Mountains, with more dangerous game. I will accompany you, for the sake of seeing something of your country. Mr. Dennis, did you say? Not the gentleman who had some dispute with the late Sir William! Indeed! And you are upon friendly terms? Ah! Very gratifying—very creditable, I am sure, to you both."

Up to this time not a word had been said about New Orleans.

"A down-easter, evidently," D'Esmonde observed to Percy when they talked the intruder over that night in the former's room.

"I wonder what Mr. Dennis will think of him?" mused Percy, somewhat ruefully.

* * * * *

Mr. Dennis thought him a "superior sort of man," principally because, for the nonce, he put off all his superior ways. At all times, even when most dictatorial and egotistic, there was a softness and

dignity about him which gilded the pill. The ladies of the Grange, accustomed to what we call "good form," were delighted with his old-fashioned courtesy. He won the way to John Dennis's heart through his prize pigs. No boasting, no self-assertion now. Once or twice whilst going through the home farm with his entertainer, he mildly "ventured to observe," and out came something which the practical squire recognised at once as sound criticism, or valuable advice. When George and Percy came back to luncheon from the park covers, they found the ruthless invader upon such a footing with all the family as to make any apology for his uninvited appearance unnecessary.

"I need not remind you, Mr. Dennis," he was observing as they came in, "that curiosity is a vice innate in us Americans. Now do pray excuse me if I ask all sorts of questions about this house, and promise that you will tell me, right out, the very moment I become tiresome? You will? Ah, many thanks! To begin, how old might it be?"

"The main building is nearly three hundred years old."

"Three hundred years old! And it has been in your family all that time?"

"Most of it."

"May I ask what is that inscription over the mantelpiece? My eyes are not as young as they were, and the character is singular. It is an inscription, I think."

"You are quite right. The slab of wood upon which it is cut was found in my grandfather's time buried under the ruins of an old stable. He had it cleansed and polished, and when I made some alterations, I had it let into the wainscoting where you now find it."

"I must put on my glasses," said the judge. "Now I can see. Ah! old English, and the quaint spelling one finds in the black letter. How very interesting!"

This was the text he read aloud:

**"Lette Desmond for Denys goe through
And Denys to Desmond be true
Noe Denys or Desmond will rue."**

Quite like a prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer! I suppose the Desmonds and

Denys of those days were sworn friends, and that their descendants fell to loggerheads, as usually happens. Is there a Desmond family in this neighborhood?"

"Not now," John Dennis replied, and as he spoke the luncheon bell pealed out.

"Don't you rather wish that you spelled you name *sans apostrophe*, and a final e?" he said, slapping George D'Esmonde playfully on the shoulder, "that you might share in the promise of that old legend?"

"I am quite content as it is," said George, "and I don't suppose I could find a chance of going 'through' for you, anyhow, in these prosaic days."

And then they went to luncheon.

"Well, how many poor pheasants have you massacred?" asked Grace Dennis, making way for George, who had been told off to a seat by her side.

"Don't ask," said her father. Mr. D'Esmonde will take away a poor idea of our shooting if he don't stay till next October. Jackson told me they only got a score of shots between them, but they bagged eight brace.

"Bravo!" cried Grace. "How many cartridges was it that Major Taylor expended last year for nine birds?"

"Fifty-six. But Taylor is a muff."

Our sportsmen had little luck after luncheon, and drove back to Wharnstead tired, and jolly; George, pleased that he had held his own with British pheasants, and Percy relieved of the fear that his other American guest would not get on with the Grangers.

"I thought you English county gentlemen liked to build yourselves fine houses," observed the judge to Percy after dinner. "How is it that Mr. Dennis, with all his wealth, is content with such a comparatively small place?"

"*Chaque oiseau trouve son nid beau*," said his host, "and the old Grange is the cradle of his race. Any snob can build a grand new house. Besides, he only spends the hunting season here."

"And the rest of the year in London, I suppose?"

"Yes; he has a house in Eaton Square."

"A new one?"

"Oh, people may have new houses in London."

"And how about business?"

"Business, such as his, takes care of itself."

"He is a most fortunate man."

"And deserves all he enjoys."

"A delightful neighbor. Pity he and Sir Stephen don't get on together."

"They are best apart," said Percy, drily.

"I don't quite see that," the judge replied, half to himself. "I shall take an early opportunity of making peace between them."

"No one would be better pleased than I should be, if they could be friends," said Percy.

"That is right sir, and does you all the more credit as it is opposed to your interests," replied Alexander.

"My interests! Oh, dear no. I have no interest whatever in the matter. I see what you mean, but you are quite mistaken. If Sir Stephen comes back a lot of disagreeable responsibility will be taken off my shoulders, and I should know clearly—but that is a private matter. I most sincerely hope he may come back, and the sooner the better," said Percy.

Why the sooner the better? Because the idea struck him that if the answer to his ultimatum were favorable, and Bessie got accustomed to be acting mistress of Wharnstead, there might be some trouble in reconciling her to a humbler home.

He had been back nearly a week by this time, yet no reply to his ultimatum had arrived, and worry re—marked him for its own. The possible return of his cousin did not promise a speedy termination of his suspense. Mr. Dennis had first to be consulted, and his answer might be again—not yet. Perhaps his letter had miscarried. Alexander might know, so he resolved to ask—sideways.

"Did you make my cousin's acquaintance in New York?" he carelessly inquired.

"No, sir, he made mine in New Orleans."

"In New Orleans! When was he there?"

"About a month ago."

"Indeed! Can you tell me if his letters were forwarded to him there?"

"I really cannot."

"Nor when he left New York?"

"No, not the exact day. Probably about five weeks ago."

"Pray excuse me these questions," said Percy drawing nearer. "I am rather anxious to hear from him. When he gave you that letter of introduction, did he mention having recently heard from me?"

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Alexander. "Dear me! how forgetful I have been. I owe you a thousand apologies for such very culpable neglect. About the land agency of course! He showed me your letter; saying in his light way, 'see what a hard-headed man of business I have;' to which I replied, 'I congratulate you, for the writer is not one to be trifled with.'"

"And yet he does trifle with me, Mr. Alexander."

"My fault — entirely my fault. He charged me with his reply, and in the press of business—but I see you are anxious. He said, 'tell him it's all right; on two conditions.'"

Percy's brow clouded.

"I am sorry there were conditions," he said. "My terms did not admit any."

"The first," continued the judge, is, that being his agent is not to make you less his cousin, and the second that the salary you name should date from the day of poor Sir William's death. They are not so very onerous—these conditions. Let me recommend you to accept them both."

"If you had only told me this at once," said happy Percy, after some further explanations, "what a load you would have taken off my heart."

Why did not Alexander tell him at once? Because his self-dictated instructions were these. "Find out if the man be popular or no. If no, gain popularity by turning him to the right about. If yes, be liberal, and make it that way."

"I've got to run up to London for a couple of days on very particular business," said Percy, at breakfast the next morning, "if you men can excuse me."

There was a guilty look upon his face, but a halo of triumph all round him. He might claim Bessie now! He stopped at

Doctor Raynor's on his way to the station, and made known the happy news. A thousand a year, and three thousand to begin housekeeping with! Did ever wooer speed to woo, over so smooth a road? Did ever a train go so slowly. Well, it gave him time to think over a thousand encouraging trifles; words, looks, sighs, eloquent silence under the moonlight, the drooping of opal eyes under his ardent gaze, admiration expressed and not resented, hopes suggested and not repelled. Surely he had won her! The lightest hansom with the fastest horse that he could select, was as slow as the express—slower after its kind; but it landed him at last at the Tiburnian mansion of Mrs. Rose.

Was Mrs. Rose at home?—he asked the page, politeness demanded that he should inquire for the lady of the house.

Mrs. Rose was out. Indeed! Was Miss Raynor in? Yes, Miss Raynor was in the drawing-room. Buttons knew Percy, had oft been tipped by him; and made no objection when the ardent lover dispensed with the ceremony of announcing him and ran upstairs alone. But Buttons grinned.

Up ran Percy two steps at a time. Quick as he went, the conservatory he passed brought back a remembrance—a flower given, a hand held just a moment longer than was necessary, and yet no sign of maidenly revolt. Ah, that night! If he had had a thousand a year *then*!

He opened wide the drawing-room door. On a low *causeuse* in the dim religious light which alone was permitted to enter that apartment; he saw the lady of his love, clad in rich robes, and by her side, with his arm round her waist, sat Sir Stephen Willford.

CHAPTER XIII.

"HAPPY IS THE WOOING THAT IS NOT LONG A-DOING."

IF the adage which heads this chapter be true, Sir Stephen must be congratulated. He came, he saw, and was conquered in double quick time. The drama was played out in a week, and the curtain had fallen

on the last scene some quarter of an hour, when Percy made his untimely entrance behind the scenes. The future Lady Willford rushed upstairs to her aunt (who was only conventionally "not at home") and prayed her for heaven's sake go down, or there would be murder. "Has he proposed?" asked the widow.

"Yes, yes; it's all right," replied her niece, "but Percy came in and saw us, and there'll be an awful row."

There was no row—there never is when there ought to be.

Sir Stephen had jumped up with a "who the devil——?" was chilled by the other's haughty bow, and subsided. The *Deus ex Machina*, or rather the Dea (who fluttered down imperfectly attired, with only one side of her face powdered, and no back hair on) found Percy hat in hand, drumming on the front window panes, looking very pale, and breathing much too quickly.

"Oh, Sir Stephen! Oh, Percy," she stammered, "don't you know each other? Or have you quarrelled. Oh, really——"

Then of course it came out who was who—to the mutual surprise of both—for, remember, they had never met before.

"Why Percy!" cried the baronet, coming forward and offering his hand; but Percy drew back and said: "Two questions if you please. Are you engaged to the lady who has just left the room?"

"Yes he is," replied Mrs. Rose—"there!"

"I would prefer his answering for himself, madam, if you have no objection."

"Why don't you answer for yourself, Sir Stephen?" demanded the widow in an agony.

"Well, of course I am," was the petulant reply.

"Are you aware who was the subject of some part of a letter I wrote to you at New York?"

"No; and I'm not now."

Percy gave a sigh of relief.

"It is proper I should tell you, having gone thus far, that the lady mentioned in that letter was, and is, perfectly ignorant of the ho—of the possibility I mentioned."

"Well, my dear fellow, that's your affair

not mine," replied Sir Stephen. "I hope you will prosper as well as I have. Why don't you wish me joy?"

"I wish you all the joy you can possibly expect."

"And I too," burst in the widow. "Ah, what a loss she will be to me! How *shall* I get on without my sweet girl? But I must not be selfish—I really must not. I give her to you, Sir Stephen. Pardon my emotion; this is too much for my poor nerves. I must run for some *sal volatile*."

And she ran. She had glanced at a mirror to see if she was doing the emotion business well, and caught a glimpse of her half-powdered face. That was why she ran. Sir Stephen gallantly attended her through the back room; and when he returned, found that his cousin had gone.

The atmosphere, full of a scent which he associated with Bessie, choked poor Percy. The stun of the blow he had received was on him still. He almost fled the house and the street, and had half crossed the park before he knew where he was or what he was going to do. Not return to Wharnstead; that would lead to questioning. He would spend the time with his mother, and go back to George D'Esmonde and the rest, as though nothing had happened.

He told her his grief, and fairly broke down when she drew his drooped head upon her breast, and caressed his throbbing brows with her cool, soft hand, as in the dear old days when he was a boy, and her own.

Awfully bad form this, isn't it? Sneer at it, golden youth! scoff at it! I'm ready. "Fellow gets jilted, runs off to his mater, and blubs on her shoulder! 'Fernal trash! Haw! haw!" Make it e-haw! e-haw! gentlemen, and the criticism is perfect. You know as much about this sort of thing as a toad does of side pockets. You don't understand how all that is stubborn and hard in the bravest and the best of us, may melt away under the magic touch of a mother's pitying caress, and do our manhood credit. So I think I'll let the 'fernal trash stand.

Very little else was said between mother and son about Bessie when the story of

her falsehood was once told. She took him to her painting-room, and showed him her new picture, and, to divert his mind, brought up again the subject of the mysterious key. No; she had received no answer from Count Tasti. Perhaps he had left Turin. Was this the season for living at Turin? And so on.

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Percy took Dr. Raynor's house on his way from the station, as promised, to tell the result of his journey; but the post anticipated him. It brought a very pretty letter from Bessie, and a very dutiful one from Sir Stephen, reporting the arrangement they had made between themselves, and requesting parental confirmation thereof.

"Never you mind, my boy," said the bluff doctor; "she's got what she wants, what you couldn't give her, and more than she deserves. She never cared a pin's head for you."

Sharp surgery this, but kind. You could not expect a father to say of his child, "The girl is a heartless flirt, and you are well rid of her." But that was the verdict in his mind.

Miss Bessie knew no just cause or impediment why she should not be married off-hand, and taken to "my lady" it over King's Morton. She therefore wrote to her dearest friends (and choicest enemies), announcing her grand engagement; and this raised a good deal of talk about some previous "affairs," particularly that with the curate; and although Percy turned a deaf ear to it, like an honorable man, some of the shafts hit, and had a curative effect upon his other wound, upon the counter-irritant principle.

Of course the news reached John Dennis, and put up his back.

"So, sir," he said to Judge Alexander, "I understand that your friend Sir Stephen Willford is in London?"

"I believe so," was the careless reply.

The judge had written him an awful letter, rating him up hill and down dale for his "cursed folly," that very morning.

"Ha!" growled the squire. "Well, I've not quite made up my mind about *London*; but he'd better not come here. If he does"

(speaking more quickly, and with rising warmth), "I'll take care no one shall visit him."

"Really, Mr. Dennis! under the circumstances——" expostulated the judge.

"A man in his circumstances has no right to marry. I'm sorry for the girl."

"I suppose you allude to that foolish card affair?"

"To that *disgraceful* card affair, sir."

"Six years ago!"

"In this country, Mr. Alexander, cheating at cards is a thing which gentlemen never forget—not so much on account of the act itself, as of what it implies."

"I am glad this subject has turned up," said the judge after a pause. "I should much like to discuss it with you, if you have no objection. Willford has told me his version, and I have taken some trouble to verify it. I don't see where the cheating comes in, Mr. Dennis."

"He confessed it."

"Oh, no! Nothing of the sort. Badgered, driven into a corner, with his own father taking part against him, he was foolish enough to beg that it should be allowed to pass over. No more. Why, my dear sir, the poor boy had no show at all! You, who took his guilt for granted, and his father, who did the same, settled it between you."

"It was a perfectly clear case."

"Excuse me, if I differ with you," said the judge, with his new smile. "Allow me briefly to state the facts upon which you relied. May I? Ah! I see you don't object. Well, in the middle of a game of 'loo,' in which six players were engaged, young Willford rises to get something."

"A glass of water."

"For the present I prefer to say 'something.' You will see my motive presently. He goes to a table where a discarded pack, which had been thrown about the room—mark this!—was placed, uncounted, and just as they had been picked up off the floor. Now what passed at this moment is all important, and until I took the case in hand, has not been investigated. You all skipped it, and centred your attention on what you guessed to be its result. In short, you put the cart before the horse.

You made your facts fit your theory, instead of your theory to fit your facts. Young Willford rises, I say, to get *something*. How do you know it was water? Because Mr. Plowden sneered at him for not drinking champagne, when he could get it. *Consequently Mr. Plowden was looking at him.* As the table was placed, only two of the five players who remained at it had their backs to it. Three of them *could* see him. How many of them did? There was no play going on, remember; they were waiting for Willford's return. Plowden saw him pour out the water; your son saw him drink it, for he remarked in joke, 'What a good thing it is to be thirsty.' Mr. Tomlyn then said, 'Never mind, put it on the sideboard.' What did this mean? The table where the water stood was very small and crowded. Willford had some trouble to put the glass back in its place. His host *saw* this, hence his 'never mind.' '*It*' was the glass. Willford did as he was told, placed it on the sideboard, and thence returned to the game. He was seen to fill his glass; he was seen to drink its contents; he was seen to put it down on the other side of the room. Now I appeal to you, as a reasonable man, to say what opportunity had he, thus observed, to secrete a card? Above all, what opportunity had he to pick out an ace?"

"It was picked out—there's no getting over that," replied John Dennis.

"I think there is," said the judge. "Let us go the mainspring—the matter. What was that?"

"To cheat."

"Granted, for the sake of argument. Mr. Willford had secreted an ace for the purpose of cheating. What was he to do with it?"

"What he did, of course," was the indignant reply.

"Which brought about instant discovery! My good sir, people who cheat at cards by sleight of hand, don't run such risks. An ace, unless it is trumps, is of little value at 'loo,' and particularly when the 'drawing' game is played."

"It was trumps, as it turned out," Dennis persisted.

"Yes, we will suppose that it was se-

creted at hap-hazard, and kept till it would be useful."

"A very likely supposition."

"Oh, I am taking everything against Willford, for the sake of argument," said his defender, frankly. "I am making my giants for the sole purpose of killing them, and effectually disposing of their dead bodies. He had the ace of diamonds up his sleeve. The cards are dealt—eighteen, and the trump, nineteen. If three players stand, and draw two each, twenty-five are out—two less than half the pack—two points less than even chances that the other ace be out. Do sharpers act on such odds? No, *sir*."

"Any how, your friend had the reputation of always winning," said Dennis, who felt the ground giving way under him, but was not yet prepared to abandon his position.

"By careful and steady play," Alexander retorted, "he played to win—there is no doubt about that—and this brings us back to *motive*. Why cheat, if he could win in the long run? His was the only cool head at that table. All the others were excited by high spirits and champagne. It was nothing to him that Mr. Christopher Tomlyn had become a barrister, and he had taken none of his wine. But we are forgetting the other suspicious card—the one found under the table."

"Under Mr. Willford's foot, you mean."

"Exactly. Suppose it had been found under some one else's foot—your son's, for example—what then?"

"My son's character, *sir*," cried John Dennis, flushing crimson, "is above dispute. I scorn to reply to such a question applied to him. He does not play cards to win. There are no suspicious circumstances connected with *his* conduct, there or elsewhere, thank God!"

"I have not a word to say against Captain Dennis, and as I have already disposed of the so-called suspicious circumstances which were connected with Mr. Willford, I have a perfect right—as, upon reflection, I think you will admit—to value the fact of the finding of that card, by putting it as I did. But I was wrong to introduce a personal matter. Such things inevitably

heat and divert discussion. Suppose the card (which I daresay had been kicked about under everybody's feet) had been discovered whilst it was under Mr. Plowden's—what then?"

"You argue it very well, Mr. Alexander," said Dennis, wiping his brows. "You are a lawyer, and I'm no match for you; it sounds all right, but, d—n it, *sir*, amongst men of honor, there is a sort of instinct about these things, and—and—it's no use talking."

"Am I to understand you to use the word 'instinct' as applied to all —; no, let me say, rather, as applied to natures which are denied the power of reason?" asked Alexander, his slow smile curdling into a sneer. "No," he added, quickly, seeing that a hot reply was brewing. "You merely admit being prejudiced. You have formed an opinion conscientiously, and you find it difficult to change it. As I said before, the boy was allowed no show at all. Had I been by his side, or even if his father had done him common justice, no scandal would have arisen, and no one would have been blamed. But now the time has come, Mr. Dennis, when a scandal *will* arise, and some one *will* be blamed, if an injustice (unwittingly inflicted, I admit that) be not removed."

"Is that a threat?"

"A threat! Not in the ordinary acceptance of the word. I do not think that Sir Stephen has any intention of calling you out, or of bringing an action of slander against you; only if you were to do as you threatened just now, and revive this old scandal, after such a complete refutation as I have given it, and just as the young man is about to make a happy marriage, I think that men of honor, with all their supposed instincts against the value of facts, would blame you, I do, indeed, Mr. Dennis—especially when they remember——"

"Well, *sir*, go on."

"Perhaps I had better not. I was on the point of tripping once again over a personal matter. I have said quite enough. Think it over, Mr. Dennis. Sleep upon it."

"Sir Stephen Willford has broken his promise, by coming to London," said John

Dennis. "A man who breaks his word does not stand well in asking for commiseration."

"Oh, dear me! you quite mistake Sir Stephen's position," Alexander replied. "Broken his promise! there was never any promise to break. His father forced him into a compact under threat of starvation: no one is bound to a thing like that. He does not ask you to let him come back here—he's coming, anyhow."

"Confound his impudence!"

"It's not impudence—say innocence, for I don't think he has the slightest idea that you treat that so-called 'promise' as serious."

"Then why has he sent you here as his advocate? Answer me that, Mr. Alexander."

"I am not here as his advocate—on this subject, at least. Perhaps I have been wrong in volunteering his defence. You were going to play into his hands, and I have stopped you."

"How so? I don't see that," said Dennis, quickly.

"Why, of course. If you persist in your version of the affair, he will be compelled to fight it out; and by acting as you proposed at the commencement of this conversation, you would give him the best possible means of setting himself right at your expense. And bear in mind that the burden of the proof would rest on you. They don't admit *instincts* into the Courts of Assize, Mr. Dennis. They prefer facts."

"You speak as though I alone knew of this scandal. If he were to come here, there are fifty people who would be reminded of it, and set five hundred talking about it in a fortnight."

"That may be; but what they would say would be guided altogether by what you might do," said the judge.

"What would you have me do? Go up to London for this man, and bring him home in triumph with a band of music?" asked Dennis, scoffing.

"I thought we were speaking seriously. If you really expect an answer to your first question, I should say 'do nothing.' You and the Willfords never were friends.

Leave him alone, and he will—no, I must not make any promises."

"What Sir Stephen may please to do is a matter of the profoundest indifference to me," said Dennis, haughtily. "And as to promises—well, I will think over what you have said."

"A very wise conclusion, sir."

"I'm sure I ought to be exceedingly grateful to you for the interest you take in my affairs," said the squire, a little nettled at the other's tone.

"*A façon de parler*," Alexander replied, with a depreciating wave of his bony hand; "but I am not without hope, Mr. Dennis, that the time may come when you will know me better, and repeat that phrase with all sincerity."

"This is the third sort of half hint you have thrown out that there is something in your mind about me or my affairs beyond this miserable card case. I am a plain man, and like to meet things straight in the face," said John Dennis.

"You will find me much of the same kidney when the proper occasion comes," replied Alexander, looking him straight into the eyes.

"Then there is something behind?"

"Excuse me I did not say so. There may be, or there may not. I said that *when* the proper occasion arrives you will find me as plain-spoken and straight-forward as yourself. Good-day, sir. Think over what I have said—not as Sir Stephen's law adviser, not even as his friend acting with his authority. I did not start the subject; but simply as a man of some common sense, and perhaps a little selfishness, who has had experience of these sort of feuds, knows that they are utterly unprofitable, and wishes for peace and quiet in a place where he expects to pass a good deal of his time."

And so the first shot was fired.

John Dennis went home sure that Alexander's arguments were convincing, and hating to be convinced.

"Hang the fellow!" he growled to himself, making the gravel fly with a great whirl of his stick. "I'll give him another chance. Jack's all right. Jack wanted him to know it long ago. I'll do it for Jack."

So we see that Judge Alexander had not been idle during his short stay in London. He found out Mr. Steadman, and with his assistance unearthed Plowden, the barrister, whose convivial habits had, I am sorry to say, brought him to grief, and that pitiable condition which follows this sort of grief when treated with stimulants, utter loss of self-respect. He was ready to remember and swear to anything for a five pound note, and would have made a much stronger case for Sir Stephen than that eventually relied upon if his examiner had been less covetous, still, it put him on the right track. It was fortunate that Mr. Berresford, the cynic, who perhaps knew more about it than all the rest, had gone out to India to practice his profession there.

CHAPTER XIV.

HE MAY COME BACK.

HAVING thus far set matters right (for he saw by his manner how Mr. Dennis would decide), Judge Alexander went to London to rate Sir Stephen some more, report progress, discuss future proceedings, and impress upon him that he must on no account think of getting married until all had been made smooth at Wharnstead.

"But why on earth *should* you tell him that I am going to claim the Grange? That'll sure to make him hold out," expostulated the baronet.

"On the contrary, it will help to make him give in. Strange as it may appear to you, Sir Stephen, we are dealing with an honorable man. Leave him to me."

Bessie, quick to put this and that together, saw in the judge the cause of the postponement of her hopes, and hated him bitterly, but was outwardly all smiles. It did not surprise him to see on her fair wrists the identical bracelets which he had made her lover purchase for Mr. Tremayne's betrothed. After all, they had reached the lady for whom they were intended (as the gossip of King's Morton informed him), though by a different route to that originally contemplated. He kept his counsel, however, as there was nothing

to be gained by telling the truth, and it might be useful hereafter.

He returned to Wharnstead, and set to work upon his genealogy, keeping carefully out of Mr. Dennis's way. It was no part of his scheme to let that gentleman imagine he was anxious about his decision. Dennis was burning to deliver it, for Jack's sake, and because he respected Doctor Raynor, and had a fatherly liking for his splendid daughter, with all her faults.

So as the mountain would not go to Mahommed, Mahommed went to the mountain, and after some beating about the bush, broke the ice.

"I've been thinking over what you said the other day about Sir Stephen Willford and that card affair, Mr. Alexander," he began. "My son is the most interested party; I only acted for him; and as he is satisfied, why——"

"Permit me one moment," interrupted the judge. "I also have been thinking it over, and it strikes me now, that my promise to be perfectly straight-forward and outspoken with you requires me to add something. To my mind, it furnishes one other reason why you should act as I fancy you are going to do; but you may think differently. I have communicated with my friend, and have his permission to broach the subject."

"I am ready to hear it," said Dennis.

"You may possibly remember that during our last conversation I said 'Leave him alone, and he'—I was going to add, will leave you alone. This would not have been strictly correct."

"Indeed! Then let him fight it out his own way!" said Dennis, firing up.

"You mistake. This has no reference to the card case, but to something of much greater importance. Sir Stephen is advised that he has a claim to a portion of the estates you hold."

"Oh! that old folly. I thought I had made his father smart enough on that. Advised he has a claim to my land! By you, I suppose?"

"Exactly."

"So I am to let him come back, and bolster up his blackened character, so that he may harass me with futile law, or screw

money out of me to buy him off! That's the case, is it?"

"No; nor anything like it," was the calm reply.

"And this," Dennis went on, getting more and more angry, "is an additional reason why I should be considerate, as I intended to be, is it? A mighty strange reason. I don't see your usual logic in this, Mr. Alexander."

"Let me assist you," replied the imperturbable judge. "If all the world knew and respected our motives, what a happy life we should lead; but they don't. People are apt to make motives. If you persisted in keeping Sir Stephen out of England under pain of an exposure, he having, as he thinks, a claim against your land, there would certainly be those who would put this and that together, and think that you did so because you were afraid of him."

"I afraid of that creature! This is insulting, sir."

"It is not meant so, I assure you. No such idea strikes *me*. I only suggest that it might arise. If I had not mentioned it, you would have had a right hereafter to turn round upon me and say, 'Is this your straight-forward dealing? You persuaded me to hush up that card scandal, to let your friend come home in peace, and you concealed from me that his main object in returning is to make an attack upon my interests!' You shall not be able to say this of me, Mr. Dennis."

"I ask your pardon. I was vexed and hasty. Shake hands. There, it's over. I understand you now, and respect you," said John Dennis. "I wish to goodness you were not mixed up with that Willford. I like you Americans. You are true and hearty. Some of you were very good to one of my girls. Can't we let Willford 'slide,' as you say, and be friends?"

"We can be friends, I hope, without letting Willford slide," the judge replied, with his new smile. "I expect to be very useful to you both, if you will let me."

"What on earth is he after?" Dennis asked, snappishly. "I beat his father; why don't he see that I can beat him over the same course?"

"It is not quite the same course."

"Well, let him communicate with my attornies."

"Mr. Dennis, this is not a case for attornies—at least, I hope not. It is one in which those *instincts* you spoke of the other day should rule."

"If I remember right, you ridiculed them."

"As relied upon against facts—yes. As applied to ascertained facts, I know of no better judgment than that which the instinct of honor affords. If I satisfied you that you were withholding from any one—friend or foe—what was justly his, would you refer me to your solicitors, and drive me to twelve dunderheads in a box to tell you what you, as a man of honor, should do?"

"Perhaps not. But how are you to *satisfy* me? That's the question. Facts require to be sifted, law to be ascertained. 'Twelve dunderheads in a box' (they need not be dunderheads, you know) is part of the machinery which society has invented for this purpose. It is only on the stage that the rightful heir comes out and says, 'I've got a strawberry mark on my arm, therefore give me up this castle, and marry me to the Lady Sophronisba.' The case you put is all very fine in theory, but in practice it won't do."

"It has made you merry, which is something, whilst upon a disagreeable subject," Alexander observed.

"'Let those laugh who win,' says the proverb. I've won, so I may laugh."

"'He who laughs last, laughs longest,' caps you, I think," said the judge, drily. "But laughing, in this sense, implies triumph. We want no triumph, no publicity, no heart-burning; no men in a box, or judge on a bench. As for satisfying you, that is to be my business; *and I mean to do it!*"

"Do you propose to begin now?"

"No. I'm not ready yet. I flatter myself that I know more about the English law of trusts than any American lawyer; but yet have something to learn. Your courts of equity are very stringent about trusts, Mr. Dennis."

"And justly. So you fancy I hold my land on a trust?"

"I did not say so."

"But you hinted as much."

"I never hint, sir."

"Then why speak of trusts in relation to my property?"

"Excuse me—the subject was Sir Stephen Willford's case."

"Oh! *he* has a trust, has he?"

"That question he will answer in due time."

"In-deed! Well, if there be a trust, there must be some deed creating it. Trusts are created by deed."

"Some are."

"And if there be a trust, there must be some one to benefit by it. What do you lawyers call the person for whom a trust is created?"

"The *cestui que trust*."

"Yes—that's the name. Now what, in the name of heaven! can Sir Stephen Willford have to do with any trust which can affect me? It's ridiculous! When you have anything serious to urge, give me a call, and I will convince *you* that you have hold of a mare's nest. I like you Mr. Alexander, and don't want you to be made a dupe of. As for Willford, let him come back and do his worst. I have only contempt for him. Let him take care, though, or he may find himself where another claimant is, picking oakum."

"I shall certainly call upon you when I am ready," was the judge's grim reply.

* * * *

"Strange—very strange!" mused John Dennis, when he was alone. "They come from America. Can it be that Willford is only a cat's paw, and that they have stumbled upon the right track after all these years?"

"There is a trust," thought Alexander; "but what did he mean by asking what Willford could have to do with it?"

Why did Alexander thus show his hand? Not from lack of cunning, you may be sure. He had fathomed one phase of John Dennis's character, and had found its soft side. He was a man who would fight to the bitter end if needed, and yet yield everything to a friendly assurance that he was in the wrong. It would be much easier to deal with John Dennis, than

with his men of law; and, if the worst came to the worst, it would be a fine point for the plaintiff's opening to assert how he deplored those unhappy disputes amongst neighbors, and how earnestly he had striven to arrive at an amicable settlement at any sacrifice short of his honor—yes gentlemen! his honor! Besides, there was much to be expected from a quick-tempered man by judicious pumping; not of the vulgar questioning sort, but by throwing out hints and insinuations at which he was likely to fire up. He had fired up already and let out an important admission; "for," argued the acute judge, "when a man begins by getting indignant at an idea and afterwards tries to cast it off by a joke—depend upon it he's hit. There is a trust. "I wish to goodness you were not mixed up with this Willford," continued the muser, quoting Dennis's words. "I like you Americans, you are true and hearty. Suppose I appear to put a spoke in Master Stephen's wheel, and be 'true and hearty' for the other side? That might answer. No, he is a gentleman, and would despise me. I must be the candid mutual friend."

John Dennis fell—apparently a willing victim into this plot. The American took great interest in his affairs as intelligent foreigners may. He was taken over the colliery at Hallowfield, clothed in miner's attire with a candle in his cap, and crawled through most of the workings which would admit his portly person. He was told how the pits were drowned and all but abandoned in the time of their present owner's grandfather; and of the immense expense of pumping them dry and providing against a similar disaster for the future—an expense, however, which was returning a handsome return. He was shown the iron smelting works at Tiffeld Brook, near Stafford, once owned by Dennis, but now worked under a company in which he held half the shares. These also owed their prosperity to the dogged resolution and wise liberality of the squire. By an invention of his own whilst quite a young man, he had quadrupled their productiveness; and doubled this again by extension of the premises. He also learned by ocular

proof what draining and chemical manures will do for lands which twenty years ago had served for nothing but to grow rushes and fever, and to feed geese upon. He was promised if ever he went to Manchester, to be shown over the business there which was originally established on some old family property, to sell the iron moor at Tiffeld Brook, but was now one of the largest machine and tool manufactories in that busy city. "If you want anything in our line from a chisel to a steam engine," said the squire, "pray go to Scott and Dennis. I am sorry I haven't got a card, for I'm only a sleeping partner now." And—crowning favor!—he was introduced to the prize pigs, who allowed him to scratch their sleek and spotless backs, and grunted appreciation of his polite attentions. He was not unfamiliar with the beast that is slaughtered in Maine, and packed at Cincinnati; but the British prize pig as he appears entire in his sty, and afterwards in hot crisp simmering instalments on the grill of a silver bacon dish at breakfast; filled him with admiration and delight.

"I suppose that man," he moralized, "is not naturally a dirty animal, and if cleanliness can do so much for the pigs, why don't you try it on the peasants."

"My dear fellow, we do, but you see the pigs get washed whether they like it or no, and we cannot do the same thing with the peasants. We give them water, but we can't make them use it. We can give them windows, but we can't open them. They hate cold water and fresh air, and any one who tries to force their use. Education only will remove these prejudices. Why fifty years ago, ladies and gentlemen were what we should now call abominably dirty! Perhaps before the end of this century the average mechanic will have learned that it is not unwholesome to take a bath and change his shirt; and his wife will know that a room in which four people have slept, requires ventilation."

"You move slowly in these old countries."

"And surely. These very prejudices, stupid as they are, spring from a feeling which is entitled to respect—a dislike by

the poor of interference in their private affairs. A worthy neighbor of mine built some excellent cottages for his laborers; gave them plenty of water, light, and air, and every convenience for securing decency and health; but, unwisely, he saddled the enjoyment of them with a condition that the state of their cottages should be inspected once a month. Before the year was out, they had all gone back to their old hovels. They could not swallow inspection."

This conversation led to inquiries into the condition of iron smelters, coal miners, and the skilled hands who worked under Mr. Scott at Manchester. The rate of wages (in these times) suggests the rates of profit; and thus, whilst apparently interested in the employed, Mr. Alexander gained information which enabled him to make a shrewd guess at the income of the employer.

He found that John Dennis was making an income of at least forty thousand a year and that his expenditure did not exceed twenty. Why was he saving all this money? For his son? His son would have all he had, *plus* the growing results of the sums he had spent on improvements for his unmarried daughter. Three years accumulations at the present rate, would make a fortune for her. For the sake of hoarding? Free-handed John Dennis was not a man to play the miser. Did he want to leave a will which would make a noise in the world; leaving his wealth to build hospitals, and endow public parks to be called after his name? That also was quite out of his character.

Sometimes—as the weeks passed—the squire would jestingly recur to their talk about Sir Stephen's alleged claim, and ask if they were ready to turn him out yet; but the judge appeared shy of this subject, and, as the young baronet lingered still in London and made no sign, it almost passed from his remembrance.

CHAPTER XV.

HARD AT WORK.

SATAN, who, according to Dr. Watts, "findeth mischief still for idle hands to

do," not unfrequently gives out his work by deputy. In the instance of Sir Stephen Willford, this employment was provided by Bessie Raynor and Mr. H. Clay Alexander in the period at which we have arrived. And he had his work to do, serving two masters (or rather, a mistress and a master, who pulled in different directions,) and striving to reconcile the claims of business with the pleasanter duties which devolve upon an engaged man. The lady of his love kept him pretty close to her side, principally for advertising purposes; and about every other post brought him some such orders as the following from his master:—

"Search in the State Papers Office, or at the British Museum, for reports of the trial of Lords Lovat, Balmerino, and others, for high treason in 1746; see if the name of Denys, or Dennis, is mentioned. If so, send me full extracts."

"Go to 19, Salem Row, Islington; ask for Mrs. Matthews (née McGee,) whose husband is a plasterer. Find out if her mother be alive, and get her address. She was a sick nurse."

"Look about at second-hand book-stores for 'Crosbie's Staffordshire Worthies' (1798;) it is out of print."

"Go to the Bank of England, and ascertain what sum in Consols stands in the name of John Dennis, and what part of it was bought in the years 1852-3-4, and in 1865 to the present time."

"Procure copies of all Acts of Parliament relating to the enfranchisement of copyholds, and send them by book post."

"Find out why Gilbert Dennis (1801) did not serve as High Sheriff of Staffordshire. He refused to take the oath. Why? Was he the same Gilbert who went into the Church and was afterwards a Canon of Lichfield? Search at the Crown Office in the Temple, and look up old clergy lists."

"Who is that your father mentions in his diary as 'Jeremy,' and 'poor Jeremy'?"

This is, perhaps, enough to show that Alexander was at work at Wharnstead, and that Miss Bessie had to dispense with a good deal of attention from her lover.

So hard at work was Alexander, that his entertainer seldom saw him, except at meal times. He went away occasionally for several days, and once was absent for a week; when he came back, his "Gladstone bag" was labelled MANCHESTER.

Long before this, George D'Esmonde had brought his sister to the Grange, where Percy became a constant and welcome visitor. Why not? The only reason which had hitherto made him hold aloof was removed. Mr. Dennis had let Sir Stephen understand that by-gones were to be by-gones. No one could say that he (Percy) was taking sides now. He had got accustomed to a lonely life in the old baronet's time, and since; but the visit to his mother, the companionship of George, and the unostentatious and thorough-bred hospitality of the Grange, woke him up—so to speak; and you must remember that love's young dream had illumined his corner of the gloomy old house in the days that were passed, and peopled it with bright and hopeful creations. It was pleasant to sit alone over his fire, and think of Bessie in those days, never to come again. To forget her was now the wise and the proper thing to do. And this could be best done in company.

He called at the Grange the day after Fanny D'Esmonde's arrival, and met her in the avenue, returning from a stroll to the village, with Miss Dennis and George.

George was very glad to see him. A gentleman who is escorting two ladies is not unfrequently gratified by the advent of a second mate of his species.

Fanny held out both her hands, and opened her face to him, like a fearless maid of Dixie, who feels a welcome and is not ashamed to show it.

"How did she like the Grange?"

"Like" was no word to use. "Do try and imagine," she said, "that you have passed your life in a place where all the

houses are built square, and all the furniture stamped out (apparently) by the same machine, and all the carpets designed as though the upholsterers were in league with the oculists; where knick-knacks are unknown, and bric-a-brac has not entered; where every thing is new, and you know exactly where to go and buy its like—and then find yourself transported into yonder beautiful, bewildering, lovable, *awful* old house, and be asked how you like it!”

“Why ‘awful?’” asked Percy, not noticing the covert reproach.

“Because of its memories. You said there was no ghost. The air is full of ghosts!”

“I hope they don’t keep you awake at night?”

“No; but they send me dreaming by day. Three hundred years! Only think what changes, what events have passed round those dear old walls—what footsteps have passed that threshold! Of course the house was occupied by Cromwell, or some of his crop-eared set (I can’t bear the Roundheads, they were so like Yankees;) and perhaps Prince Rupert surprised them, and there was a fight where we stand. But why stop at the Stuarts? Three hundred years takes us back to Tudor times, or my dates are wrong. Queen Elizabeth might have stopped here on one of her progresses. She may have mounted her horse by those very steps, with Raleigh (poor, ill-treated Raleigh!) at her bridle, and the Dennis of the day presenting the stirrup-cup! I can almost see it with my eyes open, and hear the clink of the swords as the gallants hurried out when the trumpets sounded ‘boot and saddle.’ Leicester may have leaned against that tree, and thought of Amy Robsart. Oh, if it were only like Tennyson’s talking oak, and could tell tales! Bacon may have sat on that seat, and—good gracious!” she cried, letting enthusiasm melt away into fun, “the ghost of Lord Raleigh may revisit the spot, and be shaking his head at me for talking such nonsense!”

“It is the pleasantest nonsense I have heard for a long time,” Percy said, under his voice.

Was there a spell in her eager, flushed face, with its bright, honest eyes, to make him feel just a little faint and sleepy, and to wish that the voice would go on for ever, so that he were there to listen?

What a change from Bessie’s fast talk! Bessie’s ideas of Queen Elizabeth and her times would have been based upon a burlesque at the “Strand.”

They are progressing at the rate of about a mile in three hours—Percy flicking at loose stones in the path with the loop of his hunting crop, and his companion lost (perhaps) in one of her day dreams—but as the distance to be travelled was under sixty yards, they did get in at last; and found John Dennis in the hall, just returned from his usual mid-day visit to those interesting prize pigs.

“Whenever I come in,” said Fanny, after a vigorous assault upon the mat, which Percy watched with interest, “I find something new—no, that won’t do at all; I mean some dear old thing that I have not seen before, to wonder at—”

“Then,” replied the Squire, shaking his finger at her, “we must lock you up inside, or the Grange will lose its character.”

“Prisoners are inquisitive. Who knows what I might discover if you kept your threat,” Fanny replied.

“The family skeleton perhaps.”

“I don’t think you have one, Mr. Dennis. You are all too nice and happy for that.”

“Thank you, Miss D’Esmonde.”

He was making for his “den,” as he called it, a small room which opened from the hall, when she joined him with two skips and a slide. “I’ve never been in there, have I? Mayn’t I see?”

“Certainly, but—well, come in,” said the Squire.

There was nothing extraordinary about the “den” except its wainscoting, which, like the rest of the old part of the house, was of black carved oak. A study table, some models of agricultural instruments, fishing tackle, a few iron boxes such as lawyers use for their clients’ papers, two or three half-burnt briar-wood pipes on the mantel-piece—but no ornaments, no wonder as yet. Nothing to interest a

young lady. But as it was in the days of Abomelique, so it is in the reign of Victoria. Young ladies are inquisitive. There were indiscreet explorers before Fatima, I have no doubt, and the mildest approach to a Blue Chamber is a happy hunting ground for these modern sisters. Take them to the Temple Church and to luncheon at your chambers afterwards, and notice the avidity with which the dear creatures will plunge into the most common-place recesses of your domain!

Fanny walked demurely into the den, and looked around. "Dear me, Mr. Dennis," she said, "what can you possibly want with a sewing machine?"

"A sewing machine!" he repeated, giving a quick look round as though one of those useful implements might have rambled into his domain during his absence.

"Yes. Isn't that a sewing machine?"

That was a heavy square table covered, all but about four inches of its surface, by an oblong box about three feet high. It was certainly very like an exaggerated Wheeler and Wilson; particularly as shadow hid the lower part where the treadles might have been.

Mr. Dennis shook his head. It was not a sewing machine.

"Then what is it?" Fanny demanded. Instinct told her there was a *wonder* here.

"Something which I do not show to everybody."

"But I'm not everybody." He looked for a moment into the frank young face, and replied gravely:

"No, my dear; you are not. I will show it to *you*."

He opened a drawer in his writing table, took out a key, unlocked the fastening of the cover, and lifted it.

"Oh, Mr. Dennis, how curious! how beautiful!! how wonderful!!!" she exclaimed, her admiration rising chromatically as the object uncovered met her view. "What is it? What can it be for? Oh! look at those little demons scurrying out of the window, and the big demon laying in wait for them with his club on the roof! Was anything ever so perfect! And those gnomes!—they *are* gnomes, are they not? peering from under the foundations—how

quaint! It must be immensely valuable."

"The materials are gold, silver, and iron."

"Please don't talk of materials; I was thinking of the art. Look at the grace and softness of that climbing rose, and the beauty of the angel's face! It cannot be Chinese?"

"No. It is English."

"And old?"

"Very old."

"Oh, Mr. Dennis, would it be asking too much if——"

"If what?"

"Will it open?"

"Yes."

"To—to ask if I might see the inside?"

"It is not in my power to show you the inside, Miss D'Esmonde."

"Oh, now I'm afraid I have offended you. I'm so sorry."

"You have not offended me," he replied kindly. "I have never seen it open myself." It was on the tip of her tongue to ask "Why do you hide it here?" but she checked herself in time, and stood almost spell-bound before the wonder.

It was a sort of Morresque Temple, or Palace, upon which a crowd of angels, demons, dwarfs, and creatures half human, half animal, swarmed as bees upon a hive—pouring in and out of the windows, climbing over the roof, attacking and defending the doors.

"I suppose it has been a long time in your family," she said at last, with a sigh, such as one who *feels* art may heave when contemplation of the beautiful object must be broken off.

"A long time," he answered; catching the infection, it may be, and sighing too.

"How proud you must be of it?"

"The day I should lose it would be the happiest of my life," he replied.

"It has something to do with that inscription in the dining-room," she cried, turning sharp round upon him. The next instant she could have bitten off her tongue for saying so, but the words started out in spite of her.

"What makes you think that?"

"I—I didn't think it. It came without thinking. It just flashed on me, and I

was foolish enough to say it. You must think me very rude," she added, half crying with vexation.

"I will forgive you if you tell me what made it flash upon you," he said, gravely. "Such ideas do not spring from nothing."

"I suppose it was the look on your face and the sound of your voice. There was something so *true* in your being happy to give that—that casquet up, and this made me think of the line, 'Let Dennis to Desmond be true,' that was all."

"Upon your word?"

"Really, upon my word. Now you are angry."

"On the contrary, you have pleased me very much."

"Why here she is," cried a voice at the door, "flirting with papa and— Oh! look here, Grace, do look here! He has actually shown her the casquet; madame," continued Mrs. Bowring, with a low courtesy, "allow me to do you homage." Here she threw her arms round the astonished girl's waist, kissed her, and said "you are in high favor, dear. He has only uncovered it for us about twice since we were children, and no visitor has ever been allowed to see it. I don't know why—I am sure. It would look splendid in the drawing-room, but so it is."

John Dennis replaced the cover, locked it, and answered not a word.

In the hall they found Judge Alexander, who had played the "candid mutual friend" so well, as to be reproached for having made himself such a stranger lately. He was duly presented to Miss D'Esmonde, and naturally enough the question how it was that they had not met at home—*i.e.*, in New Orleans—turned up.

"New Orleans," he said, "is a very peculiar city, bar China, and I imagine that it is the most conservative city in the world. It is full of little circles, each one considering itself the centre of its planetary system. If Mr. D'Esmonde had lived in *Jupiter*, and I in *Syrius*, we should not have been separated more than we were; first, by two miles of space, and secondly by thirty years of age."

"Miss D'Esmonde gave my daughter a

charming idea of *Jupiter*, at any rate," said John Dennis.

"Yes, she could do so," Alexander replied. "She could show her the surface of what may easily be mistaken for a solid structure. It is made of as sterling stuff, and takes as high a polish as anything of the sort in Europe; but it is only veneering, and, like most veneering, very thin. Under it—and pretty thick, to carry out my simile—you find some rough, but reliable material."

"And underneath that?" asked the squire.

"Whiskey and politics."

"I will not allow you to run down New Orleans, Mr. Alexander," said Mrs. Bowring, with prettily assumed indignation.

"Madam, those who (to use a Yankee expression) have cracked up my native city, until half its inhabitants became blind with conceit, and helpless with egotism, are less its friends than such as I, who, as you hint, 'run it down.' We have many things which ought to be run down, and hunted out, and killed, things which you did not see at *Germans*, or meet of a Saturday afternoon on Canal street."

"Are you a Southerner, Judge?" asked his host.

"I was born and bred in the South, sir, and I love it—I love it too well to be blind to its faults. We are a warm-hearted, hot-headed race, Mr. Dennis, we never forget a friend, or forgive an enemy. We can be prudent, logical, statesman-like upon occasion, but introduce one spark of passion, and away goes everything in a blaze! I was a Union man."

"I thought so," said George D'Esmonde, under his breath.

"Yes, sir, a Union man before the war. I was one of those who believed in the brain-power of the race from which I spring—the brain-power which made the Union, and for half a century controlled it. I was one of those who opposed the brutal, *vulgar* arbitrament of the sword. I foresaw what the end would be. I am a Republican; therefore, as I before observed, I was a Union man."

"Do I understand you to mean that

war is contrary to Republican principles?" asked John Dennis.

"Certainly."

"Not even as a defence against abuses and tyranny?"

"No."

"And this although your Republic owes its being to a successful revolt?"

"Yes. What creates, may destroy. A century ago we fought a Monarchy to make a Republic—that was right—latterly, we fought a Republic to change a Republic—that was wrong. Republics are changed by ballots, not by bullets."

"Look at South America."

"Aye! look at South America, and tremble at the thought of what might have befallen the grandest nation on God's green earth, if your folly had succeeded in driving home the first wedge! The smoke still hangs over our battle-fields, and no wholesome breeze has yet arisen to blow it away. The dead are unburied, and the wounded unhealed; but the time will come when every good Southerner will rejoice that it ended as it did, and every good Northern man lament that his people were not more moderate in their victory. This generation must pass away first. It cannot, or will not, think. That is what is the matter with it. It raves, and swaggers, and plots, but it won't *think*. Good heavens! for us to fight—we, who could not even make ourselves a gun—to fight! It was worse than treason—it was stupidity. This, I am afraid, Mrs. Bowring, will take as more 'running down.'"

"Oh, I don't pretend to understand your politics," replied the lady addressed, "I was talking of your—your——"

"*Veneering*? Exactly. Now I am as proud as any one can be of our polish, only I want it to go a good deal deeper, to spread a good deal wider; I want it to produce something beyond an ear for music and a taste in dress. You are not to judge of the civilization of a place by the clothes and manners of its *belles* and its dandies, the class of music produced at its opera, or other such outward shows. Go to the prisons, the hospitals, the asylums, and seek it there."

"Won't you add, in our case, the charit-

able institutions?" asked George D'Esmonde.

"No," Alexander replied, with decision. "No test of true civilization is to be found where sectarianism and bigotry prevail. On the contrary. Mark me, Mr. D'Esmonde, I shall not see the day, but perhaps you will, when a struggle against priestcraft—which, in comparison to what is now going on in Germany, will be as a tornado to the whisk of a lady's fan—will sweep over the country."

"Don't let us drift into a religious discussion," sensible John Dennis suggested.

"No fear, sir," said Alexander. "When I speak of priestcraft, I am not thinking of religion. Priestcraft, be it Roman Catholic, Protestant, Methodist, Moham-medan, Budhist, Mormon, what you will, speaks the same language for the same demand—'Give me up your reason and your vote, or I will damn your soul.'"

"Many of our charitable institutions," persisted Fanny, not to be daunted by the full-flavored word which made the judge's last sentence explode like a cracker, "are *not* sectarian, and consequently there can be no bigotry."

"My dear young lady, you are told so, and you are sincere in believing what you hear. You see—let us drop words which might offend, and say—you see a few Budhist children being educated in an institution supported by the votaries of Mumbo Jumbo. You are told that no attempt is made to influence their religious belief, and you go away, saying, 'Dear me, how liberal these Mumbo Jumbo people are.' Don't you know that the whole place reeks of Mumbo Jumbo? that the minority eat him and drink him and breathe him, and have him soaked right through and through them, without a word said or act done? It is as though some one were to say, 'Oh, this pond of mine is kept perfectly dry; you can put a child up to his neck in the water, and no attempt whatever will be made to wet him.' That's what you hear. Is it common sense?"

"That's a good idea of yours about words," said John Dennis, "and should be universally adopted. What a deal of anger, hatred, and malice would be avoided

if polemics would use algebraical signs, call predestination, *a*, the pope, *b*, the secular power, *c*, science, *d*, works, *e*, faith, *f*, and so on."

"With *x*, the sign of an unknown quantity, for charity," Alexander summed up.

"That's severe, judge."

"Severity, sir, under certain circumstances, is only another name for kindness. My endeavor to check injudicious praise of my native city, is conceived in kindness. We are an idle, an affectionate, and an easily contented people. We like to be liked, but it isn't good for us. We want to be shaken out of our idle ways, to be convinced that a few things worth having, or doing, which were not 'before the war,' are to be had, and done now; to understand that if we stand still whilst all the rest of the country is moving, we shall either be run over, or left out of the race."

"Don't you think, papa, dear," suggested Grace, when the judge had taken his departure, "that Mr. Alexander is just a little oppressive?"

"Well—ll—he's got a pompous way—y, but he's a superior sort of man," paterfamilias decided.

"I agree with Grace," said Mrs. Bowring. "He is oppressive. A sort of diluted Dr. Johnson; but I forgive that for the sake of his earnestness. He means what he says, and says what he means."

"I think so, too," said John Dennis.

"He is a very superior man."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRUST ACCORDING TO MR. ALEXANDER.

THE leading counsel in the case of the Diagonal Railway Company *v.* Dennis, was Spencer Saxon, Q.C., who in those days led the bar in the Rolls Court, and might have sat on its bench, had ambition spurred him, and outside fortune proved less kind. He had made more than a competency in his profession, he was a bachelor without a blood relation that he cared for, his health was not up to the incessant strain, mental and physical, which a great legal business imposes, and, lastly,

a grateful, but eccentric client, left him a bright little gem of a place near Harrow, which invited repose. Now a leader of the bar must not repose. He must go on at the head of the tide, or else cast anchor. Spencer Saxon was not sorry to cast anchor in so pleasant a harbor. He kept up his chambers in Lincoln's Inn, belonged to two or three quiet clubs, bought a picture now and then, played whist, was a great pillar of the drama, and never sighed for the gold embroidered robes which his juniors won.

John Dennis became his friend, before chance made him his client. Jack was his god-son. Grace was his special pet. His Christmas was generally spent at the Grange, and the house in Eaton Square was his second home. Upon such a footing, there was nothing strange in this telegram.

"Breakfast with me to-morrow, and give me two hours afterwards.—John Dennis."

The family had come up to town for the season, some week or two.

"You remember that affair with the Diagonal Railway?" Dennis began, when they had seated themselves for the "two hours." "Well, it's come up again, but in a different way."

"Indeed. The young man wants to throw some good money after bad, I suppose. It isn't the Railway?"

"You are right. He has picked up a man in America—a very superior, and I think honest, man and a relative—who has certainly put together an extraordinary case against me. I want you to tell me what to do."

"My advice is Abernethy's—'take advice,'" said Saxon. "Go to your solicitors."

"This is not a case for solicitors," Dennis replied a little hurt, and unconsciously echoing Alexander's words. "I want a friend, such a friend as Willford has, confound him! and I come naturally to you. You won't let any of that trade union humbug called 'professional etiquette' stand in the way of doing me an immense service, will you, Saxon?"

"I certainly will not, if the service be one I can properly perform."

"It is to see this man—Alexander is his name, he was once a judge—and hear Sir Stephen Willford's case."

"You don't mean to say that he shows his cards?"

"I do. Your words remind me of the beginning of what I have to explain. He came to me first of all about that affair of young Willford's with Jack—you remember—cheating at 'loo,'—and persuaded me that it was not so bad as it looked. I was too hard upon the boy, Saxon; I saw it directly; but I would not give in at first. Then when I went to tell him that his friend might come back, he stopped me, and said it was fair I should know that a claim would be made upon the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton properties."

"That's not showing his cards. That's only naming the stakes."

"Wait. Of course I went through the usual form—referred him to my solicitors and that. He told me Sir Stephen would have no law—or that *he* wouldn't, which seems to be the same thing, for he is the mainspring of it—that he would convince me I ought to give up those lands. In short, he made it an affair of honor, and was as frank and open about it as a man can be."

"With authority from Sir Stephen?"

"I tell you, Saxon, Sir Stephen is his puppet. He has more brain in his little finger than all the Willfords that ever were whelped."

"That may be; still, I don't like people who are frank and open in other folk's accounts without their authority. A good deal of pumping is sometimes done that way; but go on."

"There was no pumping. He did not even once ask what I had to say. He simply stated the case upon which they would rely."

"And you think him a superior man?" sighed the Q. C.

"If he isn't, you'll beat him all the easier when you meet."

"Oh! I am to meet him?"

"He threw out some hints several weeks

ago," said Dennis; "but it was only the day before yesterday that he made his full statement. I told him we were not fairly matched—I 'wasn't a lawyer—and that I must have some one to act for me, just as he was acting for Willford. Of course, I thought of you. Now, he's an ex-judge; he's not working this up as a lawyer, but as Willford's relative and friend. There can be no possible reason why you shouldn't listen to what he has to say as *my* friend."

"One question. He said he would convince you. Has he done so?"

"Look here, Saxon. If a man throws down the ace and the king of trumps, you admit you're beaten, because you know the value of the cards. In this case I don't pretend to know it. What he says is an ace may be nothing, the king may be only a knave in disguise, and I may hold the queen. You *do* know the cards."

"Hum! I should have liked a more positive answer. To tell you the truth, Dennis, I'm afraid of you. This man has got on your weak side. You would strip the coat off your back if some one who had wormed his way into your confidence told you you *ought* to give it away. Be ruled by me; tell them to file their bill and be d——d to them, and fight it out, as before, in court."

"I would rather not go into court."

"Absurd! I remember your old suit well. There's no man in England can oust you."

"I would much rather not go into court against Sir Stephen Willford," Dennis repeated. "If what Alexander has shown me stands your investigation, I can——"

Here he checked himself, and bit his lips.

"What was it he showed you?" Saxon asked.

"I would rather you had it direct from himself. He is in London. We can meet to-morrow."

"I am only to sift his case, then; not defend yours?"

"Precisely."

"He agrees to this?"

"He does."

"Well, of all the—never mind. Be it so

then, on one condition: Sir Stephen must be present, I'll have no playing fast and loose; making out one case now, and another hereafter, and prating about honorable efforts at compromise."

"I will tell him to bring Sir Stephen. When and where shall it be?"

"At my chambers. Two o'clock will suit me."

"I am authorized to make the appointment, so that settles it. Two o'clock at your chambers, Till then I'll try and get it off my mind. Come and dine with us to-day? I want to introduce some nice Americans. Let us be jolly whilst we may," said John Dennis.

This happened the last week of April, two months after the day on which he had shown the casket to Fanny D'Esmonde.

It is a wise social law which ordains that when people meet to do each other deadly mischief they should be more than usually polite. Judged by their demeanor, the party of four which assembled at Mr. Saxon's chambers might have met to present each other with pieces of plate, as feeble tributes of mutual respect and regard. Judge Alexander was especially flowery.

"Your name, Mr. Saxon," he said, on being introduced, "is not unknown to me. I esteem it a high honor to have the privilege of your acquaintance. I recognize in you—if you will allow me to say so—a foeman worthy of my steel. I have in my mind your argument in the case of *Smith v. Huxtable*—a most admirable and exhaustive exposition of the law; one, sir which is incorporated in our best text books."

"Suppose," replied the Q. C., quietly "that we proceed to business."

"Good," said Alexander, taking the chair at the head of the table, on which the Q. C.'s briefs were once spread, and motioning Sir Stephen to face him. "With your permission, I will sit here, where I shall have plenty of room for my documents."

As he spoke he produced, from a courier-bag, several papers neatly folded which he piled round him in little heaps, which he

patted and smoothed as though they were living pets. He was very particular to place them perfectly straight, and at equal distances one from the other.

Saxon and John Dennis took the vacant seats on each side, and waited for him to open fire. Dennis, you know, had heard the story before; the Q. C. was there to listen.

Whatever amount of rope Mr. H. Clay Alexander might demand would be cordially conceded. Having arranged his papers to his satisfaction, he gave the usual preliminary *ahem!* and began—

"I was not without some credit in my own country, Mr. Saxon, for a capacity to arrange facts, and a certain lucidity in stating their relative value and the application they bear to each other. If this be not apparent now, it will be because, like yourself, I have grown a little rusty. To begin, then. What is our motive in meeting you here? Speaking for Sir Stephen Willford, who is present to sanction and confirm every word I say" (the baronet bowed), "I reply that our motive is, in one word, *Peace*. There have been jealousies, there have been heart-burnings, there have been quarrels between the families of Willford and Dennis. There arises now a question which, if unwisely handled, might stir the ashes of old conflicts into flame. It is our desire so to handle it, as not only to ensure its amicable settlement, but to pave the way for a sincere and lasting reconciliation. We will not go to law unless we are driven. We come, with our hearts upon our sleeves, into a court of honor, in which we propose to give you the opportunity, so prized by honorable men, of acknowledging and atoning for a wrong. Such is our motive. What is yours? To——"

"Excuse me," the Q. C. interrupted. "I think I had better state our motive. It is simply that I may be enabled to advise Mr. Dennis on the legal value of your case."

"Leaving him to judge the *moral* force of such facts as survive your scrutiny. That is so. We may now commence in earnest. By a deed bearing date the fifth day of August, 1615, King James the First

granted certain freehold lands in Staffordshire, known now as the Grange and Hallowfield Estates, and forming part of the town of King's Morton, to one Stephen Willford, to hold for himself and his heirs for ever. His namesake, the present baronet, is his heir. Of that I presume there is no doubt. In the year 1626—I am glad to see you taking notes—this Stephen Willford died, and Charles, his eldest son, inherited those freeholds. I am afraid he was not quite right in his mind. He went to America (not that *that* is any evidence of insanity," said the judge, with a smile); "but his conduct when there was eccentric, to say the least of it. A short time before his departure, the first Dennis—or Denys, as it was written then—by name Gregory, appears upon the scene *as his servant*."

"That is one of the facts I deny," whispered John Dennis across the table."

"Let him speak for himself in his letters, which I shall notice in their proper order," the orator replied, with a wave of his hand. "I say he appears on the scene as his servant; what he became, he shall also state for himself. It was only in 1634 (as shown by the late chancery suit) that he assumed to possess and control those lands. Now, what has happened between 1626 and 1634 to give Gregory Dennis (let us say 'Dennis') and his heirs possession of what was undisputably the property of Charles Willford and his heirs? In the late suit you, in effect, said 'find out.' We have found out. Nothing happened. Gregory Dennis was a mere trustee."

Saxon, Q. C., made a movement which seemed to say (in a whisper) "*Now for it.*"

"I have here photographic copies of four letters written by this Gregory Dennis to this Charles Willford. If we were in court you would say, 'Show how you can prove that the one wrote, and the other received them, before you refer to their contents. I will act now, here, in this private room, with the same regularity that Mr. Saxon himself would observe, were he before the highest court of justice in the land. I can show that they were found in a box left by Charles Willford at Baltimore, amongst papers undisputably his. I can show that

Gregory Dennis (originally a working smith), prospered so that he became Borough Reeve of Manchester, and that amongst the archives of the present Corporation, there exist public notices, orders, and other official acts, some entirely written, and others signed by him. I was permitted to take photographic copies of them, and here they are for comparison. The character is peculiar. Judge for yourself if these letters, and those orders, are or are not written by the same hand. May I say now," he added, when Saxon had glanced over two of the photographs which the orator selected and handed him, "that I have four letters written by Gregory Dennis to Charles Willford?"

"For the purposes of the present conversation you may," replied the cautious man of law.

"The letter which you have before you is the least important of the four. I produce it mainly to show the relative position of these correspondents. The writer, you will observe, acknowledges the receipt of certain 'commands,' which it will be his 'humble duty' to perform, and so on—much, I take it, as a servant would write. This, the next in order, is quite in the same tone, only that it seeks approval of what he had done, as a servant (according to my contention) again. The third, which is dated after a lapse of some years (and which I take somewhat out of its turn, for the purpose of brevity), is important only as bearing upon the pedigree of Sir Stephen. It comments upon the news (conveyed, of course, by Charles himself) that he had married, and was a father. You can peruse these at your leisure. For the fourth—for every word of it—I bespeak your kindest attention. It is dated the 2nd day of June, 1630, and its contents are as follows;

* "*Most honourable Sir,*

"Most welcome was thy letter, the wh found me in goode health on Ladye daye. What wondrous things thou dost relate, what peryls thou hast braved. Of a surety, honourable Sir, thou wilt have thy reward in ye ende, wh God grante may

• Taken from the photographic copy.—P. D.

notte be farr distante. Thy poor servant hathe lyttle to recounthe. I have found a tenant for ye large house at ye King's Morton, one Simon Thorpe, a solyd mann, and a God-fearing, the wh is well, as I could have butt his worde for ye covenant, not being able to make a lease.'

("I trust that last phrase has not escaped you," the orator observed, lowering his glasses, and tapping the paper with them, "NOT BEING ABLE TO MAKE A LEASE.")

"Saving for pasturage of beasts, Hallow Field is of noe worthe. Dicke, ye forrester, who hath much skylle in suche thyngs, has tolde me thatt the woods do stande in need of thynning, for that ye greater trees do smother up ye lesser, so that theye may not groe stronge, the wyche shalle be done, and the timber solde at goode profyt. Feare not that ye Grange shall be welle cared for, for his dear sake.'

("Here, then," observed the orator, "we find the three properties—that at King's Morton, Hallowfield, and the Grange—mentioned, and an account of what had been done, or proposed to be done, upon them, rendered. In what capacity? Mark well what follows.")

"In fyne and to conclude, be sure that all things shall be done to the beste of my humble duty, as though thou werst thy own selfe here presente. If thine honourable desire may be wone, and God grante itt maye be, what greate joy will be ours, butt if it please Hym not, I and mine will be loyal and true to our truste, though a hundred years should passe. Loyal and faithful, according to the oath we have sworn.'

"And this is signed *Gregory Denys*, with the same flourish underneath, and the same peculiar formation of the *gs* and *ys* that we find in these authentic public records at Manchester.

"We rely upon this letter," said the orator, placing it before him on the table,

and pressing it softly with the palm of his hand, "as containing a declaration of trust, or, at the least, containing sufficient evidence of a pre-existing trust, to put you to the proof of your title. In the face of this letter we contend that you cannot meet us—as in the railway case—by pleading the Statute of Limitations. If you say, 'We have held these lands against the world, as owners, since 1634,' we reply, 'Here is an acknowledgement, dated 1630, that you had merely the care of them as trustees.'

'I need not remind Mr. Saxon of the jealousy with which your law regards transactions of bargain and sale of the subject of a trust, between trustee and cestui que trust. Any conveyance of these lands by a Willford to a Dennis must have been effected with due precautions, and by formal instruments. Where are these? Produce the deeds, and we will tender our apologies for giving you all this trouble, and retire.'

"Is that your case, Mr. Alexander?" asked the Q. C., without replying to an appealing look from Dennis.

"Oh dear no! To be perfectly candid with your friend, as I have been throughout, I admit that his counsel (should he force us into court), might pick holes in this letter" (caressing it again) "if it stood alone. It does *not* stand alone, Mr. Saxon; it gave me the clue to discoveries which will astonish you. I have gone through the dusty records of these two houses, as a miner digs for gold. Fatigue has not checked, or failure daunted me. My labours have been intense—immense! I have piled around me mountains of worthless trash; after having turned over every stone, and brought all the energies of my mind to bear upon every fragment. I have followed veins, full of promise, which turned out to be false. The floods of disappointment have burst in upon me, but I never gave way to despair, and why? For the hope of reward? No. I made it a personal affair with myself. I said, 'There is success to be attained, for the instincts of your intellect—never at fault—tell you so. You must attain it, or be false to yourself.'"

"Perhaps we had better return to busi-

ness," said Spencer Saxon, as dryly as before.

CHAPTER XVII.

"A BAD DAY'S WORK FOR JACK."

THE orator did not like this dryness on the part of Spencer Saxon. It put him out of swing. He loved the sound of his own voice, and the taste of his own words. He loved a good listener who would wince as the hits told, or follow his discourse with some signs of admiration or approval. He might as well have talked at the sphinx as at Saxon, Q. C., so far as eliciting smiles or frowns is concerned.

Put his manner into words, and its menacing commentary was something like "Pooh, pooh!—do get on with all this foolishness, and let's have it over." Now this was not pleasant to a man like H. Clay Alexander, but he kept his temper, and changed not his style.

"The history of the Dennis family," he recommenced, "and of the times in which they lived for more than a century after the death of Gregory, the whilom smith, gives me no fact upon which I care to rely. The object of my laborious search—the point upon which all my powers of argument and deduction were concentrated, was to find in the conduct of this family, in its own circle, and from its dealings with the outer world, some corroboration of Gregory's letter—some admission that a trust had been created, and consequently continued to exist. With Sir Stephen's assistance I discovered the first link of the chain. It is to be found in the words of the State Trials which followed the abortive invasion of England by the young Pretender in 1746. I have here an extract from a paper found in the possession of one Silas Mitchell (a creature, and agent in rebellion, of Lord Lovat) in which he had noted down what money, forces, and other assistance was promised by the various malcontents in the midland counties whom he visited. In short, he was a sort of collector sent round for subscriptions, and this—in the middle of a long list—is the result of his application

to the Dennis of that day. The "y" was dropped by this time.

Dennis, Wybert, and 50 men asked for money—says he has none, asked to raise some on his title deeds—says he has none, asked to borrow on mortgage of his estate—says he has no estate to mortgage.

"All hearsay," smiled Saxon.

"All hearsay so far, but when Wybert Dennis was arrested and taken before the Privy Council, he not only adopted it, but based his defence upon it very cleverly. The figures '50 men,' he argued, 'were written against my name as a sort of assessment before I was visited. What follows is a series of excuses, palpably idle. The Prince was in force at Derby, and I dared not flatly refuse.' This saved his head."

"And kills your case," Saxon remarked.

"This," said the other, leaning back in his chair, "is another instance of our candor, and one which I hoped had produced respect rather than a sneer."

"Pardon me," said the Q. C., "you must admit, Mr. Alexander, that I have seldom interrupted you, though you must be aware that not a few of your points challenge objection. I will not offend again."

"This Wybert," continued Alexander, "appears to have been a roystering, reckless sort of person. He had not been a week out of jail when he again compromised himself, this time to his neighbor, another Charles Willford, and a Jacobite at heart, but one of those who 'I dare not wait upon if I would,'—oh! I am not going to spare any of you. It was this cautious Willford who cajoled the more open Dennis into the Pretender's course, and amongst the papers he left (why he kept it I cannot say; perhaps to have a hold over the writer) I find this letter.

"*Dear Friend and loving neighbour,—*

"You have heard how finely I hoodwinked those rascal whigs, but 'twas a narrow escape won by a head. Dost take? I must have been drunk when that fellow Mitchell came. In vino veritas. 'Twas well for me I stopped where I did; else had it been a fine thing for thee. Send me a hundred pounds, for I am in much need

of money; and bid my steward pay thee if he can, or else give thee a note charged on the next rents, like the others, and oblige,

“‘Ever thine to command,
“‘W. Dennis.’

“I call your attention to the phrase in *vino veritas*, meaning that he had told Mitchell the truth; and also to those remarkable words, *it would have been a fine thing for thee*.

“I now come to the year 1801, when a vastly different Dennis was master of the Grange — Gilbert. He was an austere, highly religious man, and having been *pricked*, as you call it, as High Sheriff of Staffordshire, refused to serve. Why, think you?

“Because he could not take the oath that he was a freeholder of the county!

“Proofs thicken as I come to our own times,” the orator continued, having left his last point to be absorbed for a few moments whilst he consulted his notes. “John Dennis, the father of our friend here, died quite a young man. He was nursed in his last illness by a woman named McGee, who also laid out his body for the grave.

“This woman is now alive, and is living at Tewksbury, where I saw her last week in the presence of a witness, as I am always particular to guard myself against the possibility of it being supposed I could suggest or dictate answers, I simply asked her what passed, and from a great deal that is wholly immaterial, I winnowed this statement:—That on the morning of the funeral John Dennis senior took his last look at the face he had loved. McGee was in the room. He passed some time in prayer by the open coffin, and when he rose from his knees he flung up his hands with a gesture of despair, and sobbed, ‘*All above now! no one but a child to carry on the Trust. Oh, God! spare me till he is a man, and can understand his duty.*’

“So much for the past. Excuse me if I recapitulate. We have Gregory writing, ‘I and mine will be loyal to the trust;’ Wybert confessing that he had no land of his own; Gilbert doing much the same;

and John praying to be spared to teach this Mr. Dennis his duty as trustee. He lived long enough to do so. Now for the present. This Mr. Dennis keeps the accounts relating to the Grange, Hallowfield, and King’s Morton estates separate from those of his other property. He invests the net receipts also separately, and does not spend one penny of them. They stand in consols in the Bank of England. They are added to year after year, by purchase of more stock of that very safe but rather unremunerative character. He, at any rate, has prepared himself to give a strict account of his trust. I state this with the utmost respect and admiration. When I ascertained these facts (again with the assistance of my young friend), I said to myself, ‘Whatever other Dennises may have been, *this* one is a man of honor; this is not one to skulk into a court of justice in the hope of finding some quibble for his defence; this is one to be convinced, and to do right upon conviction, as surely as the day follows the night.’

John Dennis flushed crimson, and was about to reply, when a gesture from Saxon checked him.

“This,” resumed Alexander, collecting his papers, “is our case. What is the demand we make upon it? We require the restoration of the estates I have named *as they stand*. We make no claim for *mesne profits*, first because we are aware that a large portion of them have been expended upon legitimate improvements; and, secondly, because we are willing to make some sacrifice on our part to obtain a speedy and amicable adjustment. As Mr. Dennis has acquired a naturally strong affection for the house called ‘the Grange,’ we will let it, and the land in its immediate vicinity, to him at a rent hereafter to be agreed upon. In order that this settlement may be private, and give no cause for scandal we are willing to go through a fictitious sale. We will let it appear as though Mr. Dennis had *sold* us his land, and will support any excuse (if excuse be required) for his doing so. This done, we will count ourselves, if he will permit us, amongst his sincerest friends and well-wishers.”

"And if these terms be not accepted?" asked Saxon.

"Then war to the knife," the judge replied, with the utmost sauvity.

"Mr. Dennis," said the Q. C., "has heard your statement before to-day; but I have had no opportunity of discussing it with him, as he wished me to hear it first from yourself. Will you excuse us if we consult together for a short time? I have another room at the end of the passage. Pray don't move."

"I trust Mr. Dennis will find it convenient to decide to-day, because——"

Alexander hesitated. He could imply more by breaking off than by going on.

"Yes?"

Saxon wanted to hear the "because" out.

"Because, sir, when people act in the very exceptional manner in which we have acted, they expect frankness for frankness. You know your own case. It must lay in a nut-shell. Half an hour should suffice to decide what is to be your reply to ours. We will give you half an hour."

* * * * *

Saxon had hardly closed the door of that "other room" (which had been the sanctum of his head clerk in his busy days), when Dennis confronted him with a hoarse, "Well?"

"I think," Saxon replied, "that your superior man is either a most consummate rascal, or—yes; for the present it will be best to consider him a rascal."

"Let him alone. What of the case he makes out?"

"It may cause you a great deal of trouble and annoyance; but of course there is nothing serious in it."

"You think so?" cried the other, eagerly.

"Why, how can there be? What is the matter with you to-day, Dennis? You look as though you had seen a ghost. Sit down there, and let us talk it over quietly. To begin with. Do you keep separate accounts for the Manchester business and for the smelting works?"

"Certainly I do. How else could I know how I stood?"

"Well, that disposes of one of his so-called points—the keeping of separate accounts for the Grange, and so on," said Saxon. "Now tell me who is this McGee?"

"The best of a bad lot. They lived in the village. Don't you remember that night poaching case in which my keeper Tarrant lost his arm? Two of her brothers were in it."

"That was after your grandfather's death?"

"Yes; in the year I came of age."

"And you prosecuted them. So here we have spite and motive in Mrs. Barton, which will justify a close examination of herself and her statement. Did she, or did she not, think it important at the time? If she did, she (woman like) would have told it to some one—which she does not appear to have done, or your superior man would have said so. If she did not, how comes it that she remembers now what passed, after all these years?"

"Thirty-two years!" sighed Dennis.

"But even supposing that your grandfather really spoke those words, there's nothing in them. I dare say he was trustee for some one—most of us are. Had he spoken so at a dinner-table, one might have been surprised; for those who know what a nuisance trusts are, are not so anxious to burden their children or grandchildren with them; but surely we must not hold a man to the precise words that he sobs out over the coffin of his only son!"

"I was only ten years old then."

"And so know nothing about it. How can you? So much for that. I'm going over our superior man's road, but moving backwards. We now come to that Gilbert who would not be sworn in as High Sheriff. What do you know about him?"

"Very little, except that he went into the Church late in life, and never was married."

"Just the sort of man to have conscientious objections to take any sort of oath. Not much in this. Who comes next?"

"Wybert."

"The gentleman whose evidence is treated like a ten-pin—put up to be

knocked down, and then put up again. He tells Mitchell, the revolutionary bag-man, that he has no land or title-deeds; he tells the lords of the council that he lied to Mitchell, and he tells Willford that he lied to the lords of the council. A pretty fellow. On one point I do believe him. He was drunk—very drunk—when he saw the Jacobite collector. Is it because he writes the words *in vino veritas* (which I dare say he did not understand), that his drunken gabble is to be taken as Gospel truth after a century and a half has passed away? But mark the absurdity of what follows. Let us take him as we find him, according to Mr. Alexander. He was a defrauding trustee. He had let slip certain admissions (which if valuable now, were valuable then) tending to an exposure, and he confirms them (for no earthly reason beyond the indulgence of a piece of brag) to the very man most interested in establishing their truth! Call him roystering and reckless! You have to prove him an idiot before you can account for this. What is it he writes?" pursued the Q. C., referring to his notes. "Ah! here we have it. *'Twas well for me I stopped where I did'* (i.e., in his statement to Mitchell), *'else hadst been a fine thing for thee.'* From which the superior man would have us understand that the writer meant to hint, *'if I had said any more, I should have let the cat out of the bag and you into the estate.'*"

"It does read like that," said Dennis, who had been listening—his head leaning on his hand, and his eyes rivetted upon the floor—to every word Saxon said, but without evincing a sign of relief or anxiety, as point after point was attacked and set aside.

"Not with the context as *I* understand it," Saxon replied. "Look here. Wybert owed this Willford money; let him (the steward) give thee a note 'charged on the rents, *like the others.*' Well, don't you see that if this reckless roysterer's tongue had lost him his head, by not stopping short where he did, his estate would have been forfeited, and this would have been a 'fine thing' for the one who was a creditor in its rents. The line 'is rit ironical,' as Mr. Alexander's witty countryman has it."

"You are a wonderful man, Saxon," said Dennis, looking up. "What a head you have! How you do turn things! I saw only one possible meaning in it; but go on to Gregory Dennis' letter. What of that?"

"That is the pivot on which the whole thing turns. All the rest is invented, or twisted out of its natural shape, to suit it."

"Would it—as Alexander pretends—put me on my defence?"

"I think it would, supposing, of course, that it be genuine."

"I could not rely, as I did before, upon undisputed possession, for generation after generation?" Dennis demanded.

"The cases are entirely different. In the old one you sold land to a railroad, under a promise that you would give them a good title to it, and as no one had disturbed you for the time prescribed by law, you could give it by merely proving that fact. In this new case, the commencement of your title is challenged by the contents of a paper, which—of itself, and until something is produced to contradict it—appears to declare a trust."

"Which would devolve upon me?"

"Which would follow the land for ever. Consequently you would not be allowed, as before, to plead the Statute of Limitations, because it does not affect trusts, but would be obliged to bring your deeds into court—and what then?"

"That is your deliberate opinion?" Dennis asked, in a voice that trembled.

"Oh, I'm quite clear about that. You would have to show something better for yourself than Gregory's letter is for Sir Stephen, and there would be an end of it; or, rather, you would have to be *prepared* to do so, in the event of that letter being established as genuine, which (bear in mind) it is not yet. We have only Alexander's word for its having been found where he pretends, or for its being in the handwriting of your ancestor."

"It is genuine, Saxon," said John Dennis.

"How do you know?"

"I have the answer."

"Good heavens! Are you sure?"

"Quite sure; and there are no two ways

of reading it. The letting of the house at King's Morton, the thinning of the trees, the trust, are all referred to, and commented upon."

"If that be so—why—oh, its impossible!" cried the Q. C., starting from his seat, and pacing up and down the room.

"No, it is not," said Dennis, with a sad shake of the head. "You have argued the case splendidly, Saxon, and twisted things round as only a first-rate advocate can; but it won't do. Truth is truth. The letter is genuine. I believe that Wybert Denys—drunk or sober—made use of these words, and they were the truth. I believe that Gilbert Dennis acted upon the reasons Mr. Alexander supposed. I *know* that my grandfather—standing over my father's corpse—said the words attributed to him, for I have them under his hand. And, lastly, I *do* invest the rents and profits of the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton estates, because I may one day be called upon to account for them. Mr. Alexander is right upon every point."

"Then," cried the amazed Q. C., "it comes to this, you are, as he said, a mere trustee for Willford?"

"No! Ten thousand times, no!" John Dennis almost shrieked; but Saxon sprang to his side, and checked him manually.

"Hush! They must not overhear you. Sit down again; you've over-excited yourself. Let me tell them that you are not well enough to go on to-day."

"I am quite well."

"In body, perhaps, but you have worried your mind into a muddle. You say one thing one moment, and another the next."

"My mind is quite clear, Saxon. Up to a moment ago I consider that I have been unusually cool, considering all things. I flew out because—I cannot tell you why I flew out, Saxon. It's one of my greatest miseries just now, that I cannot confide in you."

"If you are serious in what you say, I don't understand what use I could be to you."

"You have heard Alexander assert that he can put me to the proof of my title, and you—the leading equity man of the day—say that this is so. I am satisfied."

There was manly sadness, strengthened by resolution, in his voice and manner, as he rose to go back to the field of the battle he had lost.

"Stay, John, stay, old friend," pleaded Saxon, catching him by the arm. "Don't be rash. What are you going to do?"

"Give in."

"Take time, man! take time to reflect."

"They will not give it to me."

"D—n them! fight them!"

"Ah, if I only could."

"Anyway, do nothing rash; do nothing at all to-day. Wait and consider. Is there no one you can trust?"

"That's unkind, Saxon. You know that if I could confide in any one, it would be in you—my oldest and my best friend."

"I detest mysteries," said the Q. C., speaking roughly, to keep down something that was rising in his throat, "and have had quite enough of this. Listen to my last words. Take care that you have a *right* to do this. There are others to think of besides yourself" (here the "something rising" made a great spurt) "Confound it, man alive! you mustn't let these romantic ideas of yours ruin your family" (but was caught by the following outburst, and passed). "There's Grace, you know, and—and—Jack, and—" [for a moment, but the latter had to give way, and was beaten by a length).

"Poor fellow!" sighed John Dennis. "Yes, it is a bad day's work for Jack."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"LETTE DENYS TO DESMOND BE TRUE."

JOHN DENNIS was the first to enter the front room, where he found the baronet and Alexander, each at a window gazing out into the inn garden. Saxon was the first to speak. He spoke quickly, as though he feared interruption.

"I think you will admit, upon reflection, Mr. Alexander, and that Sir Stephen will support me, when I urge that Mr. Dennis should be given more time for reflection. Considering the magnitude of the interests involved, and the labor it has cost you to get up this case, it is not one to be passed upon off hand.

"It was on Monday, if I remember correctly, that I made a full statement of my views to Mr. Dennis," said the person first appealed to, silencing Sir Stephen with a frown, "and this is Thursday. It was entirely to accommodate him that we consented to this interview, which was understood to be final. Indeed, when you left the room together just now, I was under the impression that the time mentioned was considered sufficient."

"Half an hour!"

"Make it an hour, two, three, if you like. The day is young yet. We are willing to wait. You lawyers are pleasantly located, Mr. Saxon. This prospect must be delightful in summer."

"Psha! Sir, we did not come back to talk about trees!" snapped the Q. C.

"Or to present idle excuses for delay, I hope," retorted Alexander.

"You mean well, old friend," Dennis whispered, pressing the lawyer's hand, "but it is no use. I am ready, gentlemen, to give you my decision."

"Then, to borrow Mr. Saxon's favorite phrase, 'Let us proceed to business,' said Alexander, resuming his place at the table, where the baronet joined him; but John Dennis did not move. The hand with which he leaned against one of the great bookcases, trembled, and his face was pale as death, but there was no tremor in his voice.

"You have stated a case on behalf of Sir Stephen Willford," he began, "which, in plain English, means that I and my family have deliberately and wickedly defrauded him and his."

"Excuse me," Alexander interposed, "I do not think that the word 'defraud' ever passed my lips."

"That may be, sir, but the meaning of it shrieked out of every sentence you spoke. I thank you for your concluding remarks on myself personally. You did me the credit to say that I had prepared myself to do what was just; but if by this you mean to insinuate that others of my name were different, it was an insult, which I fling back in your face. Look into the history of your client's race, before you presume to traduce mine."

"Am I supposed to stand this?" cried Sir Stephen, for the first time putting in his word.

"Be quiet!" Alexander interposed. "These personal remarks are irritating, no doubt, but Mr. Dennis is entitled to our most lenient consideration."

"I ask no leniency! What! you have kept me on the rack for an hour, and am I to have no reply? not ten words in defence of as good a man as ever stepped—my honorable and honored grandfather—and for a line of men to whom the very name of fraud was hateful? Convince me that they were cheats, swindlers, thieves—that's what it comes to? No! not if you were to argue for a lifetime."

"Then we must file our bill," said Alexander, rising.

"Be good enough to resume your chair, and hear me out as patiently as I did you. Convince me of *that* you cannot; but I admit you have satisfied me in one respect, how or why you will not care to know. I will not resist your claim."

Judge Alexander had taken up a penholder, and was turning it about idly (as it seemed) in his hand. As the last words were spoken, it snapped in two.

"The result is enough for us," he said, trembling all over with suppressed excitement.

Sir Stephen sprang from his chair, and made a dash back to the window, unable to restrain his joy.

"This is quite what I expected of you, Mr. Dennis," Alexander continued, after a pause, "and fully justifies the advice I gave to Sir Stephen from the first. We have striven for peace and reconciliation; I trust we have obtained both."

"Your proposition, that Sir Stephen should lease me the Grange," said Dennis, "makes me think that he has no necessity for these particular lands. Is that so?"

As he spoke, the baronet came back, stood by his mentor, and plucked him by the sleeve.

"We stand by our terms, every one of them," Alexander replied.

"You spoke of a fictitious sale of that, and the Hallowfield, and King's Morton estates."

"That we presumed would be the manner most convenient to you of transferring them."

"But does he want—must he have them?"

"I really do not quite understand you, Mr. Dennis. If he does not, why are we here?"

"Would not another sale, also fictitious, but the other way, suit him? In short, will he sell them to me?"

Another pluck at the sleeve.

"I take you now. You offer the cash value of the lands, to buy off our claim?"

"Exactly."

"Well, my reply," said Sir Stephen, "to that is——"

"That it requires consideration. Quite right, Sir Stephen," interposed the judge (this aloud, but the accompanying whisper was, "D—n you, be silent!").

"And how do you propose that the value should be arrived at?" asked Alexander.

"By surveyors—in the usual way—one for each side, only I should take it as a favor if I might *seem* to name both."

"It might be so arranged. Yes, I see no objection about that. The lands would be assessed as they stand?"

"As they stand."

"With all the improvements?"

"With all the improvements."

"And the money paid down."

"It would be a very large sum. I could not promise all at once."

"Oh, Mr. Dennis, consider all those consols!" urged Alexander, with his pleasant smile.

"They represent about five years' purchase. You would not be content with less than twenty."

"But you are otherwise a very rich man."

"Let that pass, sir. Be assured I will not owe Sir Stephen a shilling longer than I can possibly help. Half the purchase-money shall be paid on assessment, and the rest in six months."

"Good. Now we shall ask your indulgence for just ten minutes, and retire as you did, if you will kindly indicate that other room."

After his third ineffectual attempt to be

heard, Sir Stephen relapsed into sulky silence, and sulky he remained when the door of the clerk's room closed behind him.

"It's no use," he growled, "not a bit; I'll have them, if it's only to spite him. You may prate as you like about peace and reconciliation—it has paid so far; but I hate him. I hate him for his popularity, and I'll take him down. A pretty fellow to drive me out of the country for what he called cheating! Who's the biggest cheat! I wish to God, Alexander, that I had shopped him into court, and let every one know what a cheat he is—I do. I was a fool to let you give in about the *mesne profits*. He couldn't have paid them, and I'd have had his d——d carcass in gaol. No; it's no use glaring at me. You've been as much on his side all through as on mine. I would have got more without you, and I'll not give you half. It's a shame, and you know it."

Alexander looked at him as one might regard a cockroach endowed for a moment with the gift of speech, but to be treated afterwards as a cockroach.

"You idiot!" he hissed. "You miserable, ungrateful, utter idiot! Drivel another word, and I will take you to John Dennis, and tell him——" (Here he whispered four words in his ear.)

* * * * *

"You must be mad, Dennis," said the Q. C., when the others had left for their conference. "If they accept, this will half-ruin you."

"It will quite ruin me."

"Yet you persist?"

"It is the only way."

"In the name of common sense, the only way for what?"

"To preserve my honor, Saxon."

After this there was nothing more to be said, and they waited in silence for the verdict.

Alexander kept his promise. In just ten minutes, they were back again. Sir Stephen Willford, his face full of smiles, was now the spokesman.

"My dear Mr. Dennis," he said, "your idea is an excellent one. I have quite as much land at Wharnstead as I can conveniently look after, and it would be a

thousand pities to lose you out of the county. Let it be as you propose, and everything shall be arranged in the most convenient manner to yourself. As I am the younger man, it would not be becoming in me to say 'take my hand, in token of reconciliation;' but I should be both glad and proud, Mr. Dennis, if you would say so to me."

They clasped hands—one of them with sincerity.

"My wretched calling makes me return to sordid considerations, even at such a moment as this," said Alexander. "Life is short; and who knows where some of us may be to-morrow? Shall we jot down and initial a little protocol of our arrangement? Just this, for example."

He took up the broken pen, and wrote—

Upon the case presented by H. Clay Alexander on behalf of Sir Stephen Willford, Mr. Dennis will pay him a sum equal to the assessed value of the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton properties, in full discharge of all claims.

"Now," he observed, having read it over, "that may be read at Charing Cross by the public crier (if there is one), and not a soul be the wiser; at the same time, it is satisfactory to my prosaic mind. Now, my dear Sir Stephen, no one doubts your word; but do oblige an old fellow, who, perhaps, is too punctilious about forms, by signing it."

Sir Stephen was nothing loth, and Dennis, who longed to be alone, set his name also at the foot of the paper, which Alexander carefully folded and placed in his pocket-book.

"You are content now, I hope," snarled the baronet, as they went out.

"Quite content, thank you."

And so he was. The arrangement suited him exactly. He had seen enough of his client's character to know that if he could cheat him out of his share he would not scruple to do so. He knew that shooting people "at sight" in this effete old country, is followed by inconveniences which do not always attach in the freer land of his birth. And, after all, what was the value of revenge set against the price of Hallowfield alone. Even if he did not try to

cheat him, there would be trouble and delay in dividing the spoil; although, at the time at which I write, an alien could hold freehold estate in England. There would assuredly be trouble about the lands, but a simple division sum would settle accounts when the claim was paid in cash! And he would take good care that the payment should be made through him.

And, strange as it may appear, he liked the plan because it seemed to suit John Dennis. Cynics say that we have no more bitter hatred than for those we have wronged: and this man had wronged John Dennis! Wronged him by worming his way into his confidence, by manufacturing sentiments for Stephen Willford which were false, and in other ways; but he liked him. He was glad that he offered his hand when that paper was signed, and said, "This is a hard blow, but it might have been more harshly dealt. I have a good deal to thank you for, Mr. Alexander." But he winced under it all the same.

Was Dennis sincere? For what had he to thank one who had helped to ruin him? Could the blow have been worse than it was? He knew that it might have been a good deal worse, and as he is the person most interested, the reader must please accept his view. He bore no malice. If he had been deceived as to the direction of Alexander's movements until the fatal day of explanation came, he had no one but himself to blame. The judge had behaved frankly to him, loyally to his friend, and had been a valuable moderator between them. That Sir Stephen was a hypocrite, was as clear to him as the sun at noon. Left alone, he would have turned him out of house and home without the faintest compunction. The compromise was effected through Alexander's influence. For that he had to thank him, and he did so out of the depths of his generous heart.

When the first blow was struck, he telegraphed for Jack—

"Get leave, and come home. I want you. No one ill."

At first he concluded the message "All well;" but this was unfortunately not the

case. So he substituted the other words, to relieve anxiety.

He parted with Spencer Saxon at his chambers, and went home.

"Has Captain Dennis arrived?" he asked the janitor.

The captain had arrived, and was taking a bath after his journey.

"Ask him to come to my room when he is dressed."

John Dennis opened his desk, and out of it took an old book, bound in vellum, and clasped with a brazen clasp, of curious workmanship. He opened it with a sigh, placed it on a table near him, and waited for Jack—thinking.

"Well, dad," said the bold dragoon, when their greetings were done, "what's the row?"

"A serious one, my boy."

"Something going wrong with the business, eh?" asked Jack, getting grave.

"No; the business is all right, better than ever," said his father.

Then it flashed upon his son what it must be. No one ill at home—nothing wrong with the business! Why, of course, there could be no doubt as to what it was—his father was going to marry again!

"Well, dad" (he was answering his own thoughts) "why not? You're a young man still, though you *are* a grandfather. Don't look so miserable about it. I shan't forbid the banns."

In spite of all his trouble, the squire could not help laughing at such an absurd mistake, and the laugh did him good. I am not sure whether a good laugh is not as efficacious as a good cry, for clearing the mind.

"No, Jack, I'm not going to marry, and if you were to guess till Doomsday, you would never get within a hundred miles of the truth, so don't let us waste time."

"I'm all attention, dad. Fire away."

"Ours is a very old family, Jack. We have an old house, and old plate, and many other old things, amongst them that inscription over the mantelpiece in the dining-room. Do you remember it, my son?"

"Of course I do—

*"Lette Desmond for Denys goe through
And Denys to Desmond be true
Noe Denys or Desmond will rue."*

that's it."

"Good boy! word for word! Well, there is something else in the family older even than that—a *secret*, Jack—a secret which we have kept for over two hundred years, and which we are bound in honor to keep, until we are relieved of it by one having the right to do so."

"Well, dad, why shouldn't we keep it? It seems quiet enough. We've got on pretty smoothly with it for two centuries. If you don't mind it, I don't. I don't see why either of us should worry over something that happened before our great-great-grandfathers were born. Keep the secret, dad, and when it comes to my turn, I'll keep it. It won't bother me. It won't occupy the best bed room, or waste the '42 Lafitte, or catch the measles when the house is full of company. I rather enjoy the notion of family secrets; they are like family portraits—surround you with the odor of respectability, and cost nothing to keep."

"You shall learn presently, my boy, what this secret cost us to keep," said his father.

"Then there is something really serious the matter?"

"Yes, Jack, there is, and it touches our honor."

"That is safe in your hands, sir. Whatever you say or do, I'll stand up for—it's sure to be right. I could not help you, much, to decide what to do, but if I can take any trouble off your hands, or relieve your mind of any anxiety, you've only to say the word, and it's done."

"You're a fine fellow, Jack!" replied his father, proudly. "Thank you for your confidence. I think I have deserved it, for the 'row,' as you call it, is over, and there is nothing for you to do except to grin and bear the consequences."

"I'm glad I'm out of it," said the imperturbable dragoon. "I can do my share of the grinning and bearing, but I'm not so sure about the other part, if it's the sort of row I suspect."

"What do you suspect?"

"That this old secret, which we are bound in honor to keep, has leaked out somehow, and you've got to buy up somebody who knows it."

"You are burning; I will not keep you longer in suspense. Take this book" (giving him the vellum volume, with the brazen clasp), "it contains the history of our secret. Here, where I place a marker, is where you should begin to read. Never mind, for the present, the detached papers which are pasted in at the commencement. Read from where I have marked, carefully, and when you have finished, call me, and I will tell you all that remains to be told."

So saying, John Dennis left the room, and his son began to read the history of the Secret, which had been kept for two hundred and fifty years—read it, as no Dennis had ever yet read it before—out of the presence of Death, or the shadow of a newly-made grave.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRUST, ACCORDING TO JOHN DENNIS.

THE pages marked by John Dennis in the old vellum book, were written in a small, clear hand, and headed thus:—

"This statement is compiled from the papers signed Gregory Denys, Martha Denys, and Charles Willford, which will be found elsewhere, for the benefit of my grandson, who, in the ordinary course of nature, will be charged with our Trust at an early age, and need some guide for their proper interpretation."

Then follows much with which the reader is already acquainted, as it epitomised the life of Hugh Desmond as narrated in the First Book of this history. It told how he had rescued Martha Denys from trial (or, rather, drowning) as a witch, of his persecution by Willford, the witchfinder, and his faithful services thereunder; how, after the murder of his wife, and abduction of their son, he had entrusted her with the casket of the three keys; how this had been removed from the ruins of the old brewhouse; how he allowed it to be supposed that he had perished amongst those ruins, and how Willford had attempted to obtain possession of his

property; how he set sail for the New World, to seek his son; and how his will and other papers, entrusted to Martin Earle, the goldsmith, had been stolen on the very day of his departure; and then it went on to show what followed.

"Gregory Denys accompanied Desmond to New Caledonia, where their fears were realized. The expedition with which little Hugh was supposed to be, finding the colony it had gone to join, rescued, broke up and scattered. Part went to the West Indian Islands, and part—having touched at New York—went on to Virginia. They found that the boy had really been of the company, and was well when it dissolved; but which way he was taken afterwards, they could not ascertain. Desmond followed one of the ships to St. Croix, and Gregory returned to England. Only one letter was received from him between this time and the year 1615, when Willford appeared with a Royal Deed of Grant, and took possession of the lands now known as the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton estates. Gregory had no power to resist him, but waited, hoping against hope, that his master would come back and foil the rascal, as he had done before.

"Nine years passed, and then Charles, the son of Stephen Willford, came to Gregory with the confession pasted on page 28, made and signed by his father upon his death-bed. As the writing of this confession is difficult to decipher, and is in some places, almost faded out, I will give you a copy here, in plain English:—

"I praise God that he has brought me to a frame of mind in which I do not fear to confess a deadly sin, and desire to make atonement therefor as much as is possible in this world. It was I who robbed Martin Earle of the will and papers entrusted to him by Hugh Desmond. I took them to be the better able to identify and claim his property under a process which I had instituted when he seemed to have died some months before. I had a presentiment that he would never return from his far-off voyage. For my purpose, I gained the ear of a 'prentice lad, one John Eastman, and persuaded him that this Desmond was in a plot against the King's Majesty,

and that the papers he left in his master's charge would, if found, cost the goldsmith his head. So he let me into the house on the day Desmond sailed for America, and all else had gone to wish him God speed. This 'prentice, when first I met him, was dissatisfied with his master, angry with his fellow-'prentice, and seemed an easy tool; but the old man had spoken him kindly that morning as he went out, and, when all seemed won, he withstood me. I call heaven to witness that I did not seek his life. I struck him in my anger, and as he fell his head came against a corner of the iron chest in which the papers were, and he died. I dragged his body to the yard, and buried it—oh! with what labor and remorse—under a great stone, and had only time to secure the plunder, and leave signs that it was the work of a common thief, and fly, before they returned. Afterwards I hardened my heart. I had not intended to kill the lad; I was doing Desmond no wrong, for he was surely dead now, and had not found his son. I doubted much if there was a living son to find; for he had fallen into hands that would spare not, and the ship which took his sister to Italy was wrecked. So I got a grant of the estates, destroyed the will which indicated what and where they were, and prospered. But the hand of death is on me now, and I see my sin. I charge thee, my son, who wrote this, to make restitution—to Desmond if he be living, or to his kin if he be dead—as you value the repose of my miserable soul, and hope for mercy yourself when you are as I am now. When I am buried, hie thee to Manchester, and seek out one Gregory Denys, an honest man, and true to Desmond. He will tell thee all that may be known about him, and aid thee to do *my will*.'

"To this confession he signed his name, and it was brought to our ancestor, a poor smith, John, but an honor to our race, and the founder of its fortunes.

"Charles Willford was true to his trust. He followed Hugh Desmond to America, and hunted for him through all the colonies, braving dangers and privations which are partly recounted in his letters.

When he died, Gregory, by arrangement between them made before he left, took possession of the lands, and they have remained in our family ever since.

"So you see that we are not masters of the Grange and the Staffordshire estates, as all the world believes; but only caretakers of them for the heir of Hugh Desmond, to whom we owe most of the land we really possess; for when he entrusted the casket to Martha Denys, he gave her the deeds of our Manchester property and that at Tiffield Brook for herself and her son. He made our fortunes, and we should be curs indeed if we ever forgot it.

"My dear boy, the oath which Martha Denys swore is a very solemn one. Wiser heads than yours or mine have held that it must be kept sacred. '*May God so deal with me and mine, as I and they—with knowledge of my oath—deal with thee and thine, so long as there may be a Denys to serve and a Desmond who needs our service*'—are no light words.

"You will read on pages 97, 109, and 300, how some of our ancestors have discussed their position. I agree with Cyril Dennis, that sufficient trouble was not taken to find Desmond's daughter (who was saved from the wreck, as is well proved, for Martha Denys was with her, and came back safe). Too much faith was pinned upon finding Desmond or his son, until all clue to the other child was lost. I also agree with David (a conscientious man, and a great lawyer, as appears by his works, which you will find in the library,) that, Desmond's will having been destroyed, we must go back to his instructions to Martha Denys, and account to the holder of the keys as he bade her—if ever they are presented. But this was written many years ago, and the longer the time that passes, the greater should be our caution.

"Desmond gave one key to his daughter before she went to Italy, the second fell into Willford's hands by accident, and he took the third with him. He might have found his son, and given him that third key as a token (for Gregory had written—see page 41—that the will had been destroyed, and he might have received the

letter). On the other hand, he might have lost that key, or had it stolen from him; and the same with regard to the others. So that if these are ever presented, we must not take them as evidence of a gift, as Desmond intended, but enquire carefully into how they were come by. They may be presented to us. We have all had presentiments that they will. Be not you the first to think differently. Stranger things have come to pass.

"David's other notes are worthy of respect. 'If the keys never be brought back,' he writes, 'still if one doth prove that he is the right heir of Hugh Desmond, we must needs admit him; for although the delivery to a stranger, for good consideration, of the key of a chest containing deeds be a good delivery thereof, and consequently of the land to which they pertain, this ousteth not the right of the heir, who takes by inheritance, no such delivery having been made.'

"Lastly—remember this. ON NO ACCOUNT WHATEVER is this trust to be made known, save by the head of the family to his successor, or to a recognized Desmond. Before your poor father's corpse, I prayed that I might be spared until you were of an age to understand it; and you will now remember that I have often impressed upon you how sacred to us—first as Christians, and next as gentlemen—is an obligation which rests upon our honor. I was preparing you for this—not in vain, as your conduct on several occasions has proved. Act as my private papers will show you I have acted by the properties in question, and my blessing, and God's blessing go with you."

Thus ended the retrospect made by old John Dennis and read by the father of its present reader, when he stood all alone in the world, a boy of seventeen.

So absorbed was Jack in the narrative, that he did not notice when his father came in (John Dennis stayed away until the temptation to see how Jack was taking it became too strong), and when he had finished, and threw up his eyes in wonder, there his father stood, watching him.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Why,

dad, it would make a novel, only I don't see where the trouble comes in."

"Sir Stephen Willford, aided by an American lawyer, has made a claim for the Staffordshire estates," replied Dennis.

"Don't he wish he may get them! What has he to do with it?"

"His lawyer has an old letter from Gregory Denys to Charles Willford, in which he writes of a Trust, and an oath to keep it, and this, coupled with other facts they have dug out of our history, is the foundation of a pretence, that we hold this land for the Willfords."

"What insolence!"

"They have much to show for it, Jack; they have that Royal Grant; they have that letter, and those facts—all true in effect, but false by application; they have what Saxon says would make a Court of Equity put me on my defence."

"Well, what then? We have a good one," said Jack.

"You forget. Turn to the first lines of old John Dennis' last paragraph. *On no account whatever* is our Trust to be made known, save by the head of the family to his successor, or to a recognized Desmond. My mouth is sealed, Jack, my hands are tied; I cannot defend myself."

"But, surely," Jack argued, "such a fix as this was not foreseen. It seems to me, dad, that our first duty is to stick up for the estates, and if we can't do so according to rule, we must do so *somehow*. Of the two evils—licking Sir Stephen is not the greatest—don't you think so, dad?"

"That would entail publicity, and publicity, litigation. Scores of spurious Desmonds would appear; we should have no peace; we should be harrassed by actions and suits, and slowly bled to death by lawyers' costs. No, my boy, there's no fighting to be done; but there is a third evil—a little bit less than the other two—and that I have accepted. I have promised to buy Sir Stephen out, Jack."

"Whew. That'll cost money."

"The full value of the estates. They bring in about eighteen thousand a year. This at (let us say) twenty years' purchase, would represent a capital sum of three hundred and sixty thousand pounds. I

think that by selling this house, and the Manchester business, and giving, in part payment, my shares in the Tiffield Brook Works, I can just make it up. But this is ruin, Jack."

"My God! yes."

"For myself I don't care, and you are pretty well provided for, under your mother's marriage settlement. It comes hardest upon poor Grace. I must have a home for Grace."

"You'll have the Grange, surely, when you've paid its value?"

"To live in," John Dennis answered, with a smile; "but where is the bread and mutton to come from? Every shilling of rent and profit must go into the trust fund. Will you do something for your sister, Jack?" he asked, in a husky voice, and with wistful eyes.

"No, sir," Jack replied, with decision, "I will not; but I'll do everything for *you*. I'll sell the things in settlement; I'll sell my commission; I'll sell the coat off my back, and go to work in my shirt sleeves in the Manchester factory, for thirty shillings a week, sooner than have no share in this. Dad, I thought I loved and respected you up to the hilt already, but, by heavens! I'd rather be Jack Dennis than a duke, this day!"

It was some time before either of them spoke again.

"I only want a few hundreds for Grace, till I get on my legs again," said John Dennis, putting away his handkerchief; "I'll make it up if I live, Jack, never fear. I'll manage Hallowfield myself now, and that will help. Why shouldn't I pay myself, instead of some one else, if I can do the work as well?"

"Good job Gerty is provided for," said Jack. "We must get some decent young fellow with lots of tin, for Grace."

"I rather fancy that she has got a young fellow for herself, but I don't know about the 'tin,' said his father, with the first smile that had lit his face for a few days.

"Who is he, dad?"

"His name is D'Esmonde (D, apostrophe, and an e at the end). Do you know, Jack, I once had a dim sort of idea that he was the man we want, but I sound-

ed him, and his sister also—I even showed her the casket—but they know nothing, seek nothing."

"Where do they come from?"

"From the United States."

"Oh, Lord! Yankees!" exclaimed the bold dragoon. But that won't do for Grace."

"Wait till you see them," replied his father.

Grace had come up for the season, and banished brown holland from the London house for about a month, at this crisis, and the D'Esmondés (who had taken up their quarters in a huge hotel, conducted upon American principles), were again welcome guests. Her father was right, she had got that young fellow for herself; but whether he had gotten her, was a question yet to be asked, and he funké it, for he was a shy, proud man, this D'Esmonde.

"They will be prejudiced against me, because I'm an American," he fretted, "and think I'm after her money."

Nevertheless, he took great interest in Miss Dennis' movements, and she—inno-cent as a daisy!—let out when she usually rode in the park, what days she sketched at South Kensington, and so on, and soon ceased to be surprised at finding George loafing about in the vicinity. Then, he had to call for Fanny when she spent the morning in Eaton Square (which was about three times a week), so that they saw a good deal of each other.

"Now Jack's come," Grace told Fanny D'Esmonde, "he'll show your brother all sorts of sights, and introduce him to some young men. Dear papa's friends are all very nice, but just a wee bit fogie, don't you think?"

It may be that Jack, not having heart for gaiety, neglected to keep his sister's promise, or, perhaps George preferred fogies. Be this as it may, things went on pretty much the same as before, except that papa became very busy—more busy than Grace had ever known him to be.

There were busy people at the Grange, also—surveyors, two sets of them (one for the land and houses, and one for the coal)

—and all employed by John Dennis, who placed his house at their disposal, as the inn at King's Morton was not renowned. To his great surprise, Percy Tremayne found himself requested to assist in the valuation of the land.

"I don't forget that you are not a surveyor," Dennis wrote, "but you know every yard of the place, and its worth, as a farmer. You look after rents and crops, and the other fellow will do the trigonometry."

So just when Percy had promised himself a little quiet, and perhaps a run up to town after the bustle and worry of getting Wharnstead ready for Sir Stephen, who spent his Easter there; he was put in harness again.

The lady (presumptive) of the Manor, also spent her Easter in the country with her family. She could afford to be "good." How sweetly she begged papa's and mamma's pardon, and how nice she was to Mary—need not be told. How she went over Wharnstead, duly protested, and shyly suggested dull amber silk for this room, and blue satin for that, was noted by the young man from Jackson and Graham's in a big book, but for the present does not concern us. It may however be interesting to state that Percy beheld all this without the faintest quiver of jealousy or heartache. Bessie affected to ignore that he had ever loved her; treated him as a dear old friend with whom flirtation was impossible, and the better she played her part, the more thoroughly he despised her.

When the survey began, the baronet and his right hand man Mr. Alexander, returned to Wharnstead, and was most hospitable to the surveyors—out of respect for his worthy neighbor. Acting upon the same kindly motive, he praised the condition of the fields, vaunted the extent and good quality of the coal, and the rising importance of King's Morton. "I shouldn't wonder if he's going to sell some of it," he remarked. "Hope he'll get a good long price." The festivities at which these eulogies were repeated, somewhat retarded the surveyors' work, but put three out of the four into an excellent humor

with their entertainer—with themselves, and with the property they surveyed.

The fourth (Percy) was in a fidget to get the business done and over. Count Tasti had called on his mother, and shown her own letter with quite a collection of foreign postage stamps upon the envelope, as a palpable excuse for his silence. It had missed him at Milan, followed him to Vienna, Berlin, Paris, and eventually ran him to earth in London. He was delighted to renew their acquaintance (without the slightest hint at the starvation days when it was begun), and was her most humble servant to command.

"He knows all about our family," Mrs. Tremayne wrote; "and has promised to bring me our pedigree, which he had made out when he was trying to persuade my father to petition for the restoration of some property in Venice, which the Austrians had confiscated. He says I am not the first of my race who married an Englishman, for that I am the direct descendant of a Ribolini who eloped with a British Buccaneer. There's a romance for you! He knows nothing about the key which he hears of now for the first time from me; but has promised to enquire amongst some old people and servants, and pick up the clue for us if there be one. George Desmond and his sister drove over on Saturday. She was looking very well, and as bright as a bee. Won't the corn grow of itself, and the beasts eat and drink without you for a day or two? I should like you to see Count Tasti, if only to thank him for the trouble he is taking. Fanny seems to have made a great friend of Miss Dennis; do you know her brother? He is in town I hear, &c., &c., &c."

Percy had never seen Captain Dennis. Beyond the "card case," and a few domestic comments made at the Grange on the absent son and brother, he had never heard of him; but no sooner had he re-read his mother's letter than he began to envy, hate and malign this promising young officer and unoffending gentleman in a most unchristian manner. And all because Fanny D'Esmonde had made a great friend of Grace Dennis, and the good-looking dragoon (he had been shown his

photograph) was her brother! What a pull these idle butterflies have over us working bees—he thought. Here's this one fluttering about the park and enjoying himself right and left, whilst I am taking stock of sheep and measuring muck heaps! And that sister of his! Of course she'll be getting Fanny invitations to balls where he will meet her, and tickets for flower shows where they'll walk together; and be backing him up in every way!

So Fanny had visited his mother and seen her home on Father Thames in all its spring-tide dress. He could shut his eyes and picture her moving about over the emerald velvet lawn with her southern swing—as bright as a bee and as graceful as an antelope—revelling in the beauties nature spread before her, and reflecting them back from the mirror of her delighted face as the river reflected the sky. He was glad that Captain Dennis was not with her *there*.

The news about his pedigree and the key went in at one eye and out of the other; but his mother's last observation respecting Count Tasti struck him as a very proper one. He would make a point of running up to town for a few days as soon as the survey was over, to—to thank Count Tasti.

There has been very little love-making in these pages, but some very smart practice in this direction has been going on, so to speak, behind them, whilst the D'Esmondés were at the Grange.

CHAPTER XX.

VERY CONVINCING.

JOHN DENNIS spent most of the time now in the city or at his solicitor's, learning the lesson which those who want to raise money all of a sudden have to go through—namely, that the holding value, and the selling value of a thing, are two vastly different quantities. This lesson had double application in his case, and gave him double anxiety. The sum to be paid Sir Stephen as the value of the Staffordshire estates would be calculated upon their value to hold; the other property upon which this money was to be raised,

was worth only its value to sell. The shares in the Tiffeld Brook works for example. To hold, they were away above par; but throw half of them on the market, and down they all would go. Indeed “the mere fact of your going out of it,” John Dennis was told, “will shake public confidence in the company for awhile. You must sell gradually, and wait.” But wait he could not.

There was trouble also in disposing of the Manchester business. His partnership with Mr. Scott had three years to run, and the land was leased to it for that period. Mr. Scott would consider about dissolving by mutual consent, or buying Mr. Dennis out, if he would only be patient about it, and wait. But wait he could not, and to sell the land without the good-will of the business with which it was identified, would be a sacrifice indeed.

So affairs got more and more dismal as they were looked into, and those who had to be consulted wondered what on earth John Dennis was about. “A fellow may want to get out of trade,” said the hope of his stockbroker. “I can understand *that*, when he goes in for a title, but hang me if I'd chuck as Dennis is going to do!” For a report had got abroad that Mr. Dennis of the Grange was to be made a peer, and one journal was “permitted to announce that his title would be Baron Morton, of King's Morton.” If it had been known that his son was going to “chuck” his commission in the army, the odor of a rodent might have been perceived in the air.

Yes; poor Jack's fortune would have to go. A sorry fortune enough for a bachelor captain; but a drop in the ocean to be levied. Still, it had to go, and his commission with it—and to go cheap, for the regiment was in orders (out of its turn) for India.

So the surveyors went on finding out how good and valuable was the property to be redeemed; and the means of redemption shrunk, until it became clear that total ruin stared John Dennis in the face.

He never quailed, he never repined; and Jack, his son, backed him up in bank parlors and stock-brokers' offices, listening

demurely to a lot of talk he could not make head or tail of, just for the chance of pressing poor old dad's hand under the table now and then, and letting them see "it was all right, you know."

From unsuspecting Grace came the stabs. She—lady of the house, and manageress-in-chief of its hospitalities—wanted to know when he would give his dinners, and what night she should fix for the first ball; "because, dear papa, you know," she urged, "that unless we get the invitations out soon, all the nice people will be engaged."

He had not the heart to tell her there would be no more balls for her, and that the fine old family plate which had so often graced his board must go to the silversmith, or there would be no dinner for themselves before the season was out. Well, he was keeping the Trust; he was doing as Duty bade, and—

"Ever following her commands,
On, with toil of heart and knees and hands,
Thro' the long gorge, to the far light had won
His path upward, and prevailed."

And already caught some glimpse of "the shining table lands" above the—

"Toppling crags of Duty scaled,
To which our God himself is moon and sun."

One day, when he had come home unusually jaded and weary in body, and sick at heart—for Jack, occupied with other business in his interests, had not been with him, and things were looking their blackest—he was told that a lady and gentleman were in the drawing-room waiting to see him. He had just flung himself heavily into his easy chair, and was in no humor to entertain visitors. Was not Miss Grace at home?

Miss Grace was, and had ordered that these cards were to be taken to him as soon as he came in.

Upon these cards was engraved—

"MRS. TREMAYNE,

"The Willows, Kingston-on-Thames."

"LE CONTI TASTI."

Had they been waiting long?
Nearly an hour.

"Young Tremayne's mother, I suppose," he said to himself, as he went down; "come to thank me for giving her boy a lift. I wish she hadn't."

But what did the little stout man, with short white hair and beard, and buttoned up so tight, with a red and green ribbon on the lapel of his coat, whom he found with her and Grace—what did he want?

"I hope I have not disturbed you, Mr. Dennis," the lady began, when Grace had introduced both visitors, "especially as my only excuse is such a bad one."

At any other time he would have replied that *any* excuse which gave him the pleasure of her acquaintance would be a good one; but now such little courtesies hung fire. He simply bowed, and this brought her to the point.

"In one word, my excuse is curiosity. I am told that you can enlighten me on a matter which has been puzzling me for a long time; and as my son cannot get away from his employment to do so for me, I have ventured to call upon you myself, and ask you what is the meaning of this?"

So saying, she placed in his hand a gold key, the haft whereof was fashioned like a heart, entwined with forget-me-nots.

Had it been red hot, the start that John Dennis gave might have been accounted for.

"May I ask you one or two questions before I answer yours?" he said, as soon as he could catch his breath again.

"Oh, certainly! Give and take is only fair."

"In the first place, who told you I could give you any information about this curious key?"

"If you will permit me," Count Tasti interposed, in excellent English, "I will reply, as it is on account of investigations made by me that madame is here. I was informed by a very old man—a countryman of my own, named Fabri, living in Dean Street, Soho—that no one would probably know more of the Desmond family than a Mr. Dennis (*he* called the name Denys), who once lived in Deansgate, Manchester. I went to Deansgate, Manchester, and found that you, sir, are the head of the house of which he spoke."

"That only leads to a further question," replied Dennis, with something like his old smile. "What has the Desmond family to do with this key?"

"This," said the count. "Many years ago, I had the honor of being intimate with this lady's father, who was then an exile. Italy was not a kingdom then, and some of her noblest sons were—were as my good friend. When our prospects brightened, I tried to induce him to claim certain estates long confiscated, and for this purpose I had his pedigree made out—a long affair, very long; for, as his claim would have to be made through a daughter of the house of Ribolini, which is now extinct, we had to trace back his line to theirs. Do I make myself understood?"

"Go on," Dennis replied, almost in a whisper.

"We traced it back to a Maria de Ribolini, who married an Englishman, named Desmond, and was murdered in his stead by some of her kinsmen, who followed them to this country for revenge. You will think that this has nothing to do with the curious key; but, with your patience, I think I can show you that it may have."

"Proceed in your own way, count. I assure you I am all attention."

"Many thanks. After the death of this poor Maria, her only child* was brought back to Venice, and from a list of family jewels made out years afterwards, and which fell into the hands of the expert who drew up the pedigree I have mentioned, it appears that this key was hers. Now, the fact of an object possessing no very great value, except as a work of art, being included amongst the diamonds and other precious trinkets she obtained by marriage, seems to show that it may have a history. Does it not strike you so?"

"It may have a history," echoed John Dennis. "Yes, it may have a very strange history."

"Good. It may also be that its history is bound up in some way with that of the Desmonds, as it was brought from England. If, therefore, the old Fabri (whose father and grandfather were born and died

in the service of this lady's ancestors) be correct in saying that you are well-informed about Desmond, we hoped you might be able to tell us something about the key. Is your question answered, Mr. Dennis?"

"It is; and also in part one which would have followed—namely, What makes you think that your key has a history? Have you any other reason than that you have just stated?"

"Only this," Mrs. Tremayne replied. "My father prized it much. At the time Count Tasti has mentioned, we were often in want of bread; but he would not part with it, and conjured me never to do so. There is something else which strikes me as curious, only I am hardly at liberty to mention it at present."

"I will not force your confidence," said John Dennis, with suppressed emotion. "I have only one more query. Is the pedigree Count Tasti spoke of in existence?"

"I have it here," said the count, tapping his breast. "I bring it from our legation, where it was finished, to-day for madame; but there is nothing in it that helps us."

"Will you trust me sufficiently to let me judge for myself?"

"Perfectly, with madame's permission."

"I really must apologize for taking up so much of your time," she said. "We did not dream of going into all these private matters, which cannot interest you; but as you asked——"

"I accept with pleasure all the consequences of my inquisitiveness," said Dennis; "and I have listened to the count's statement with the deepest interest. My dear Mrs. Tremayne, this is no *façon de parler*, I assure you. That key *has* a history, which I may—God grant I may!—be able to tell you. But bear with me a little—I have been much agitated to-day."

"And we have bored you! I am so sorry."

"I shall look over some old papers, and—and—come again this time to-morrow," he broke off; "and leave me this," touching the parchment, which had been drawn out from under Count Tasti's red and green ribbon.

* The worthy count makes a mistake here.

"Did it not strike you that our friend's manner was a little odd?" Percy's mother inquired of the count, when they were seated in her carriage. "He was barely civil at first, and how excited he got at the end!"

"It is the privilege of his estimable countrymen to be eccentric, my dear madam," said Tasti, shrugging his shoulders.

"Brookes!" shouted John Dennis through the trap of a Hansom he hailed before his late visitors were well out of sight; "and half-a-crown if you get there before half-past six."

Half-past six was Mr. Saxon's regular hour for dining at his club when in town. It wanted five minutes of that interesting hour when John Dennis swooped upon him like a kite upon its prey, and bore him away to a deserted card-room.

"Now," he panted, "look over this" (spreading a parchment upon the table), "and tell me if it's all right."

"It's a pedigree," observed the Q. C.

"Of course! I know that; but is it correct? Read it, and see."

"My dear fellow, how can I possibly say if it is correct, if I read it a dozen times! It begins with one Oscar de Ribolini, and it ends with one Percy Tremayne; and I dare say it contains the births, marriages, and deaths of a number of people utterly unknown to me. For example, how can I tell that Cosmo de Ribolini really married Marcelina Bossio, August 23, 1611, and had issue three sons—Hugo, Carlos, and Francisco—and one daughter, Maria?"

"It's proved—it's proved, Saxon! by the pedigree," Dennis cried, slapping the parchment.

"Then why ask me if it is correct?"

"I mean is it correct in form—is it what the law calls evidence? Answer me that."

"It depends. If it comes out of proper custody, is supported, and not contradicted, it may be."

The joyful countenance of Dennis fell.

"Only may be!" he moaned. "What cursed quibbling!"

"Now do just consider. If I get some sheep-skin and seals, and write down that

the Emperor of China married my grandmother, and had issue Hugo, Carlos, and Spencer Saxon—is that to bind anybody?"

"But this is certified by a judge, who states distinctly he had the proofs before him. Now, *do* attend. You read Italian, I know. Here's his signature and his seal, dated 1847; and it is attested by the Sardinian minister. Don't that make it good?"

"Let me see. Yes, you are right. Why didn't you show me that at once, instead of wanting to know if all this marrying and burying be correct? You are brimming over with mysteries, Dennis, and my dinner is being spoiled."

"Oh! never mind your dinner. If you only knew what this is to me!" exclaimed Dennis.

"Come and share my lamb cutlets?"

"I'll not taste food till I am sure this is authentic!" slapping the pedigree.

"Then go, my dear fellow, to the Italian Legation, hunt up the minister or a secretary, and ask; only wait till they have had their dinners."

"Bravo! I never thought of that."

"Of their dinners?"

"No, no; how you worry! It isn't kind, Saxon, when you see—but these last entries" (returning to the pedigree), "they are English. 'Helena de Cravalli married Percy Tremayne, at the parish church of Greenwich, and their boy was born in London.' That can be confirmed any day."

"Fee one shilling to the clerks," said Saxon. "But my lamb cutlets——"

"'May good digestion wait on appetite, and health on both,'" quoted Dennis, wringing his hand. "I'm off."

"Without expounding the mystery?"

"Yes; I have too much respect for your lamb cutlets."

Away he went to hunt up the minister. The chancellerie was closed for the day. Where did his Excellency live? No. 10, Westbourne Park Gardens.

Away he went (the vixenest chestnut screw in that Hansom long remembered the day) to Westbourne Park Gardens. Was the minister at home? His Excellency had just gone out to dinner. Could the Secretary of Legation be found? Well,

he sometimes went to the St. James' Club about that time.

Away bowled the Hansom to Piccadilly, and there, on the steps—as good luck would have it—stood the secretary, with a cigarette in his mouth, and his lorgnette in his hand, killing time until it would be proper to appear at the opera.

In a quarter of an hour afterwards, away went John Dennis again—this time to a telegram office, where he wrote the following message:—

"To Percy Tremayne, Esq.,

"Wharnstead, King's Morton.

"Stop the survey, and come to me instantly.

"John Dennis."

But Percy never got that message. He had left Wharnstead ten hours before it was delivered, and it fell into other hands. There had been trouble at Wharnstead—a terrible quarrel between the cousins—out of which Sir Stephen emerged with a well-defined black eye. Percy had knocked him down and left the house, late as it was.

No one, except Alexander, knew what it was all about. It began in Percy's bedroom, whither the baronet had followed him, after a very noisy dinner party to the surveyor's, and with a good deal of Champagne and Burgundy under his belt. Perhaps these fell out amongst themselves: for Burgundy is hot-headed, and the "glorious vintage" brooks no rival near its throne. Anyhow, the baronet gave them the blame. He had taken too much, and stumbled against the bed-post—"that was all," he stammered.

"But Tremayne has left the house!" cried his angry master.

"Good job too, d——d upstart! Can get a better fellow for half the money," quoth the Burgundy.

"I believe he knocked you down. What is the matter with your eye?"

"Hit it against the bed-post," lied the Champagne.

"Bah! Don't play the fool with me. I believe he knocked you down, I hope he did. Do you know what happens to a

man who slaps another in my country! He get's killed."

"We have none of that infernal nonsense here," said the baronet with blue lips, "and so I tell you. I'm not going to fight that fellow—a fellow no better than my servant."

"You white-livered skunk! You're not fit to black his shoes." Alexander almost spat the words at him.

"If you talk like that you can walk out after him."

"Can I?" Alexander replied between his teeth. "Then I'll know beforehand what he walked out for. Now" (striding up to Sir Stephen, and seizing him by the throat with a bony clutch, not to be escaped), "now then! Tell me why he 'walked out'—the whole truth—or I'll shake the life out of you."

And he let him have a sample of what the threatened operation would be like; by way of encouragement.

King's Morton was not going to be put out of its jog-trot ways even by telegrams. John Dennis' message was delivered at Wharnstead just about the time when Percy (who had passed the night at the station inn) took his seat in the London train. It fell into Alexander's hands, who felt no scruple about opening it.

"*Stop the survey!*" he exclaimed. "What is the matter now?" What tricks were being played, and he absent? This would not do at all. He packed up his bag, ordered a carriage, and leaving the baronet to sleep off his "drunk" and develope his black eye, started for town, to have it out with Dennis.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FRUITS OF IT.

JUDGE ALEXANDER found the man he was going "to have it out" with in good company and was not sorry for it. The velvet glove had been tried, and now it was time to see what the iron hand would do. He found John Dennis in his drawing-room, where Mrs. Tremayne and Percy, George and Fanny D'Esmonde, and Saxon,

Q. C., were assembled, and in a voice loud enough for all to hear, asked—

“Now, Mr. Dennis, what is this I hear about your stopping the survey?”

“Perhaps I had better answer that question,” said George D’Esmonde coming forward. “Shall I, Percy?”

“I treat only with principals, sir,” replied Alexander in his loftiest tones.

“That is precisely the reason why you should treat with Mr. Tremayne and your humble servant,” George replied.

“Ha! I see your game. Well then, let me tell you that if any one has advised Mr. Dennis that he can shunt his liability to us by a bogus transfer to you—he’s made a mighty big mistake.”

“The estates to which you refer, Mr. Alexander, were not his to transfer,” replied George.

“We know that”(with a scoff) “and as he chooses to play fast and loose with us, others shall know it too. He got those estates as trustee for Sir Stephen Willford, and kept them from him by fraud.”

“No, sir,” replied D’Esmonde. “He got them as trustee of the heirs of Hugh Desmond and kept them *for* us like the high-souled gentleman he is.”

Had Percy and George rehearsed it ten times over, they could not have done it half so well; for it was spontaneous. They walked up to where John Dennis stood, and each took and pressed a hand.

“May one venture to enquire,” asked Alexander somewhat subdued, and therefore lapsing into elegance of diction, “who are included in the word ‘us?’”

“Mrs. Tremayne and myself,” George replied.

“Then perhaps one of you will kindly enlighten me as to who this Hugh Desmond was, and what interest he possessed in the estates granted by King James the First, to Stephen Willford.”

“That sir, is our own private affair,” D’Esmonde answered him stiffly.

“Look here, George,” interposed John Dennis. “Mr. Alexander has acted fairly and kindly in this matter. I think he ought to be told. *You* can tell him. He stood between me and a litigation which

would have been disastrous to us all. He thought he could convince me I was in the wrong. Why not convince him now that I was not?”

“Your wish is my law,” replied George.

“And ours,” said Percy.

“We leave him in your hands, sir; convince him yourself.”

“You forget the obligation, my boys.”

“So particular, when it is all over. Well, Percy, bring along the book, and we’ll do the convincing for ourselves,” said George D’Esmonde.

Whilst the three are going over the strange eventful history recorded in the vellum book, the reader must be told how they became entitled to use it.

The pedigree left with John Dennis by Mrs. Tremayne established her status as the heiress at law of Hugh Desmond so conclusively, that the trustee could tell her the history of the golden key, and when the silver one was mentioned mother and son exclaimed in a breath—“*George D’Esmonde has it!*”

George was sent for, and (without being told why or wherefore) was asked to tell *its* history. Now we know that he did not like to talk to strangers about this key; but the assurances given him that no idle curiosity prompted the request, and the manner of Dennis (whom he had excellent reasons just now for propitiating) in giving them, unloosed his tongue, and he told the tale. Told it, not as he had done before in the twilight at the “Willows,” but with all its names, dates, and particulars. The man who was found dying in that hut was no other than Hugh Desmond, and he lived long enough to narrate his own story, and to hear that of his son. The young man remembered well having been carried away from his home when he was a child, by a strange man on a horse and put on board a ship, where he was kindly treated by a woman who had lately lost her boy of about his age. A justice of the peace was sent for, and all this was taken down in writing. Did this Hugh Desmond say anything about the key? Yes, he bade his son keep it carefully; and, as he was much exhausted, put off further conversation till the morrow—

which never came. He passed away in his sleep.

"So you know nothing as to what it means?" asked Dennis.

"Absolutely nothing. My people have attached some superstitious value to it. That is all," George answered him.

"On account of that vision or dream?"

"I suppose so. One may respect old traditions without believing in them," he said carelessly.

Then they let him read the book.

Next, they talked it all over, and congratulated each other.

Lastly, consternation fell upon them.

If George D'Esmonde was the heir-at-law of Desmond's son—and there was no doubt of this—Mrs. Tremayne, as heiress-at-law of his daughter, was portionless! And this, although but for her, George would never have got a clue to his rights! Terribly hard, this, on Mrs. Tremayne.

So they sent for Spencer Saxon, and had it all over again for the third time. The Q. C., after having assured them that nothing short of an Act of Parliament would put them to rights, proceeded to recommend what George had already made up his mind to do, *i. e.*, to share and share alike, for, he argued the fact that Desmond gave one key to each child (the third being put out of court by his last words to Martha Denys, "Beware the hand which holds the iron key!"), may fairly be taken to show what was the disposition made in his will.

"And if they do this," said Dennis, more as a statement than a question, "they're safe."

"I think," replied the cautious Q. C., "that if they don't quarrel amongst themselves, and hold their tongues, they will be as safe as—as they can be."

"Now, Mr. Alexander," said George Desmond, closing the book of the Trust, "you see how all your premises were right, and all your conclusions wrong. We all think that you deserve immense credit for the way you worked your case out, and we leave you to form your own estimate of that noble man (pointing to John Dennis) who was about to sacrifice his fortune

sooner than betray the secret of his house."

"Sentiment, sir, sentiment!" was the sneering reply. "Sir Stephen is not to be won over by fine words. How do we know but that this agreeable meeting has not been planned beforehand? I mistrust surprises, Mr. D'Esmonde. I will form my own estimate of Mr. Dennis very shortly." He drew a paper from his pocket-book as he spoke. "I have here," he said, aloud, "an agreement signed by Sir Stephen Willford and by John Dennis, in these words—

"Upon the case presented by H. Clay Alexander, on behalf of Sir Stephen Willford, Mr. Dennis will pay him a sum equal to the assessed value of the Grange, Hallowfield, and King's Morton properties, in full discharge of all claims."

"Did he know, when he wrote his name to this, that the heirs of Desmond were in existence? If he did not, then his promise was a binding one. If he did, he tried to play us a trick, and deserves no pity. And observe, if you please, he does not bind himself to give up those estates, or even to redeem them. He agrees to pay us a sum *equal to their assessed value*, and this for a good consideration. Ah! you are listening to me, Mr. Saxon, I am glad of that. *For a good consideration*, I repeat, to avoid litigation, which he could not meet without breaking the traditions of his family, which—to use his own words—would be *disastrous*. What matters it in logic or morality that this pressure has been removed? I will grant, without prejudice, that it is removed. How does that alter our position? Why, it was his own proposition to give us money instead of the land! Had he arranged to make over the estates, it might have been different. Did he think it a good compromise when he made it? That is the question. Did he mean to carry it out when he made it? What is he going to do now?"

"To your first question I reply, yes," said John Dennis. "To your second, yes; to your third, pay the money to the last shilling."

"That I will never allow," exclaimed George D'Esmonde, warmly.

"Or I." This came as warmly from Mrs. Tremayne.

"I am afraid," observed Saxon, taking a pinch of snuff, "that we shall differ on the subject of consideration."

"I will not be sheltered under any lawyers' quibble," said Dennis. "I did mean to pay the money, and have found means to do so. My signature has never been dishonored yet, and never shall be."

"Are you in earnest?" Alexander asked, in a rather shaky voice.

The categorical replies to his concluding questions had taken him aback, and what followed was lost upon him.

"In sober earnest. You have *convinced* me again, Mr. Alexander, and this time there will be no surprise," said Dennis.

"What a man! what a man!" exclaimed the judge, throwing his long arms over his head with that gesture of scaring wasps we know of, and sinking on an ottoman.

A great struggle was going on within him. The veins of his forehead rose in large blue knots and throbbed. He swayed to and fro, with his face buried in his hands. He stamped like a pettish child. He wanted to come out of this affair with something to say against John Dennis, and he could not. He wanted to let his admiration of that strict regard for honor—that almost sublime self-abnegation—have vent, and he could not. There was a fiend fighting with the wreck of an honest mind, within him, and the contest was a fierce one—too fierce to last long.

"Listen, all of you!" he cried, starting up, and looking as wild as we have ever seen him, "before the devil, I have cast out, takes unto himself fifty worse than he, and makes a villain of me again! Listen! I will not go against that man—no, not for an army of Willfords. For that Stephen? Never! He *did* cheat at cards; he confessed it when he had drunk himself honest the day we met last at Mr. Saxon's chambers. The wretched sot hic-coughed his delight at having '*done*'—that was his elegant word—having done John Dennis twice over. He tried to bribe Mr. Tremayne, the miserable, *stupid*

ass! He attempted to play tricks with me—yes, with ME! He pretended that as he was to get money instead of lands, his bargain with me, for half of them, was off, and that he could pay me only what he pleased—the thief! I have done with him; I discard, I dispose, I will expose him. As for you" (turning to Dennis) "I give in. I am afraid of a man like you. If I were God, I'd strike blind an enemy such as I have been to you! Of course I knew that you were not bound to respect this rag" (tossing the agreement from him). "What was the basis of your promises 'The case presented by H. Clay Alexander. Well, that case was a fraud! Do you hear me? a fraud! *The woman who brought home Charles Willford's son had a husband living when he married her.*'"

"Did your client know that?" asked Saxon.

"Yes, he did, I told him in your clerk's room. That was why he consented to the compromise. Talk of dishonoring your signature!" (this to Dennis,) "it is only dishonored by being written within an inch of that scoundrel's! Let others tell you how your honor is affected—I dare not say a word on that—but of this be sure, Stephen Willford shall stand branded as a sharper, a cheat and a liar, if he ever troubles you on any other ground."

"Your superior friend has some good left in him," observed Spencer Saxon, when the judge had retired.

"Poor man! yes," said Mrs. Tremayne, "he very nearly cried at the last; but where is Mr. Dennis?"

"I really believe he's gone down to shake hands with him," Percy replied.

"He is quite capable of doing so," was Saxon's comment, after another pinch. "I have not yet made up my mind which is the most unreasonable creature, and the finest fellow in this romance—Hugh Desmond in the beginning, or John Dennis at the end."

"I think the order of the names in the first line of the old legend should be changed," said George. It is Denys who has gone *through* for Desmond.

"I like it best as it is. Mrs. Tremayne

contends 'going *through*' only gives me an idea of physical assistance, but *true*! what a big little word 'true' is!"

At this point John Dennis reappeared, looking shy.

The Tremaynes took their leave; and Fanny adjourned with Grace to be told something, and John Dennis wanted terribly to be alone, and think it all over, and over, and over—but George wouldn't let him. He fidgetted about the room, he turned over photographs he had seen fifty times before. He buttoned and unbuttoned his coat, till he half tore off the buttons. He set to work composing a speech, but no three consecutive words would stick together when he tried to repeat them. So he blurted it out anyhow. The insatiable fellow was not content with a moiety of eighteen thousand a year: he wanted something more. He wanted Grace. She had accepted him that morning under the Kensington Limes, "if papa did not object," and this was why the crafty creature was so willing to oblige "papa" by telling all about the silver key. Poor little Gracy had had a hard day of it—a proposal (for which she was not wholly unprepared) four first-class surprises, and a glimpse at the old Mr. Alexander—were enough to try stouter nerves; but all's well that ends well.

Jack came in from Manchester just as they were going to dinner, tired, and in an ill humor; for he had bad news. Old Scott would neither dissolve or buy.

"He pursed up his ugly mouth," said Jack, "and said it was 'a very extraordinary proposition—very extraordinary'—like an old poll parrot! They've got an absurd story down there that you're to be made a peer, and he's as jealous as a cat—confound him!"

Then the day's work (or at least half of it), had to be gone over for the fifth time.

"What I can't make out, dad," said Jack, when the story had been brought down to the conversion of Mr. Alexander, "is how you ever let that fellow into your confidence."

"Consider for a moment, and you will. I thought he was on the right track—that

somehow or other he and Willford had found the right Desmonds. When he first threw out a hint about trusts, I felt sure of it."

"And so," mused Jack, "he has got the iron key! He'll make them pay smartly for that, I'll be bound."

"Why should they pay anything? They don't want it."

"What!—not to open the casket?"

"I hope that they will not open it," said his father.

"Hope first then, that they may suddenly become angels of light: no mortal man and woman could resist such a temptation if they had the chance of gratifying it. But why should they not open it, dad?"

"Because they have come to a very fair and proper arrangement between themselves which might be deranged if they pried into that old casket. It is good to leave well alone, Jack. If Mr. Alexander were to drop his iron key into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, I, for one, should be very well satisfied."

The judge had other uses for that key. He redeemed it from Sir Stephen according to contract; and he sent it with his "compliments" to Mr. D'Esmonde!

This necessitated another family counsel, by which Dennis' warning to leave well alone, and not open the casket, was received with a chorus of groans.

"Have it your own way," he said. "It's your business now—thank God! not mine; only I warn you there may be disappointment—there may be something in the casket to show how Hugh Desmond wished the lands to be divided."

"All the better if there is," said D'Esmonde.

"You forget that their value has changed since his time. What was a fair division then, would not be a fair division now," replied Dennis. "Remember what Saxon said, 'hold your tongues, and don't quarrel amongst yourselves, and you are safe.'"

"One would think it was another Pandora's box," Mrs. Tremayne observed with a smiling face. "Are we going to fight over the casket, Mr. D'Esmonde?"

"I think not," he answered her.

"But I," broke in Fanny, "I will do battle to the death with everybody (except Mr. Dennis) who says we are not to open the casket. It's downright *wicked* not to see what's inside, now we have the keys."

So it was settled that they should all run down to Staffordshire by the early train next day; open the casket, have a picnic dinner at the Grange, and return by the mail. "All," included Spencer Saxon and Count Tasti.

The squire's "den" did not present a scene sufficiently imposing for the ceremony of the day. The casket was carried in triumph into the dining-room and placed upon the table facing the legend of the house; which appeared to stand out clearer than usual.

"Beware!" muttered Fanny in mock solemnity. "Beware the hand that holds the iron key! That's mine. Behold and tremble."

"Now, please attend," pleaded Dennis, "or you'll only hamper the locks, and waste the small chance you have of getting it open. It must be unlocked first by Mrs. Tremayne with the Gold Key, then by George D'Esmonde with the Silver Key; then *locked* by you, Miss Bright-eyes, with the Iron Key, when a fourth key-hole will appear; into which the Gold Key is to be pressed without turning it, and then the lid ought to rise by itself."

After some considerable blowing into the gold key-hole, and picking it out with hair pins, the key, well lubricated, was introduced and turned. The silver lock was much more restive. The casket had to be placed on its back and oil poured in the key-hole; but by patience and perseverance the key was worked round, and they all heard the bolt shoot back.

"Now, it's my turn," said Fanny, coming forward. The hand which held the Iron Key trembled. "Wh—where do you suppose the other key-hole will appear? Will anything jump up, or—or go off—do you think?"

"Judging by the past," replied George, "it will be time to look out for that in about three-quarters of an hour. Go on Fanny, if you want the honor and glory of trying it first."

She put the Iron Key in its lock, shut her eyes, gave it a push and a turn, and lo! round it went without any trouble. But nothing jumped up or went off. The club held by one of the dwarfs had moved slightly, and showed where the other and last key-hole might be. A little more picking and blowing and oiling, suffered to slip dwarf and all aside, and expose the last remaining lock. By this time the whole of the mechanism had got thoroughly oiled, and the action of one part appeared to ease the rest. Mrs. Tremayne again applied the Gold Key, and then the lid of the casket rose slowly by itself, until it stood wide open before them.

They all fell back and held their breath, in spite of themselves. No one liked to be the first to touch the contents, and all crowded forward to look at them, as though they were wild animals which might jump out and scratch.

"Now I think I may step in," said Saxon, as soon as his eye caught the parchments, which he grasped and proceeded to unfold, as though they were the most ordinary pieces of sheep-skin. "You will observe," he said, "that they are fastened in two bundles—this marked H, and this M. What is the meaning of H and M? Clearly Hugh and Maria. I was quite right, you perceive. His will was to divide equally."

"Aye, aye, aye!" muttered John Dennis, half sorry, half vexed.

"I'll make a note, and tell you presently what is in the one parcel and what in the other," Saxon continued; "for I suppose I am more accustomed to deeds than any one here."

So they left him to his work (after having locked the casket for the sake of unlocking it again and seeing the lid rise), and scattered till dinner-time.

"Dreaming?"

"How you startled me!"

"You" is Percy, and "me" is Fanny D'Esmonde, whom he found standing in the broad garden-path which ran round the house, and dreaming—day dreaming. Hence his salutation.

"I suppose there are more ghosts than ever now?"

"You have not forgotten that silly speech? Yes, I suppose there are. This must be the window through which poor Sweetheart was shot; and yonder, away in what is now the rose-garden, is where that dear brave Tom Stevens seized Marco. Oh, how I wish I had lived in those days!"

"I am sorry to hear you say so."

"Why?"

"Because they were bad days, vicious days, days darkened by ignorance, days in which might was right, and justice bought and sold. Look at our own history!"

"I'm proud of it, Mr. Tremayne."

"So am I; and, being so, I don't think much of an age which wanted to burn a Hugh Desmond for sorcery."

"Do you know that George is going to drop the apostrophe and final e, and take back the old name? We are going to be Desmonds to the end of time, Mr. Tremayne."

"I am glad to hear it. We, of the younger branch, will pay him all due respect as the head of the family."

"Except for the name, you are as much Desmonds as we are—are you not?"

"Certainly. I wonder what relations we are?"

"Twentieth cousins, ten times removed!" she laughed.

"And, what is nearer still, friends, I hope?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, being cousins and friends, don't you think we might be something less formal than *Mr. Tremayne* and *Miss Desmond*?"

"What, Desmond and Tremayne, as though we were at school?" she asked, rounding her bright eyes.

"No, not that. Your brother calls me 'Percy'; why shouldn't you?"

"Then you'd call me Fanny?" she deliberates.

"After a little practice, perhaps I might venture to do so," he replies.

They have not moved an inch. They stand in the shadow of the wing, each busy with something that will rue the day.

He has got her fan, which she dropped when he "startled" her, and she a cloth-of-gold rose, which she has begun to pick to pieces deliberately.

"Well," she replies, after a little consideration, "I'll ask George."

"No, no," he breaks in, quickly; "you mustn't, indeed!—at least, not yet."

"I always tell George—everything."

"I wish I could mesmerise him, and ask something."

"It wouldn't be worth while."

"Then one of two things must be—I am either a very unhappy man, or——"

"Well, go on."

"Or you do not tell George everything—do you?"

The sweet face is bent down now very close over the rose.

"Let us go in and see the casket again," she murmurs.

"There is a casket" (his voice has sank, and trembles) "in comparison with which that one we saw to-day is poor and its contents valueless. Could George tell me if I may ever hope to open it?"

"Who has the keys?" she asks, shyly.

"Ah! that is the question! Who has the keys? Will the only key I can employ move the golden lock? It is uncouth, unpolished, this key of mine; but made of honest metal, Fanny—dear Fanny! look up. The name of my key is Love, and the casket is your heart, my darling. Tell me if it will, if it may in time open it!"

"It never has been locked—to you," she whispered.

The division of Hugh Desmond's titles—indicated by the tying up of the deeds in the casket—turns out to be a pretty fair one, even for these days. If anything, it is in favor of the Tremaynes, as they get the lion's share of Hallowfield; but the owner of two centuries and a half ago never dreamed that "ye messuage and tenement known as ye Old Mill, at Morton of ye King," would be wanted for a railway station, and that an acre of land at that end of the town would become worth ten acres at the Grange. There was nothing to quarrel over, and John Dennis was happy.

Troubles are gregarious, as Sir Stephen Willford discovered. He had not hurt John Dennis; Alexander had taken him at his word, and made him pay for his services; and his black eye would not get well. He was to be married in a week, and the delicately-blended shades of green, orange, and pink, which decorated the injured optic, would not fade away. Well, if the worst came to the worst, he'd have it painted. The worst did come, and was not to be painted over.

On the very eve of the day when his splendid Bessie was to make him the happiest of baronets, that fickle damsel eloped with a duke—a Spanish duke, of noble mien and princely fortune—who subsequently turned out to be a croupier at Monaco.

*"Nada mas! nada mas! Va caier la bolla! Zero negro!"**

Grace's boy will be Desmond of the Grange (they have gone back to the old spelling); but as long as he lives, John

* The croupier's cry—"No more!" (betting)
"no more! The ball is going to stop! Black Zero!"

Dennis will be master there. It is probable that the Tremaynes will buy Wharnstead House and Grounds; for Sir Stephen, soured by Bessie's faithlessness and cut by every one, has taken to drink, and dislikes the place—there are such a lot of snakes about there, he says.

The casket stands where Gerty Bowring said it should be. It stands in the drawing-room, "plain for all folks to see," under a glass case; and the time comes when a Hugh Desmond claps his chubby hands and screams with glee as the funny little man with the club starts a oneside, and the lid rises up "all of its own self" when grandpa turns the iron key.

And thus the Family Trees, rooted in Sin, Sorrow, and Death, grow up side by side, and the Sun of Love and happiness ripens delicious fruit upon their topmost boughs, the which, mingling quivering leaves in the night breeze, may give out some sound, which to the ear of Fancy seems like the old legend—

*"Lette Desmond for Denys goe through
And Denys to Desmond be true
Noe Denys or Desmond will rue."*

THE END.

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